

IMPACT EVALUATION OF INTERREG - IPA CBC PROGRAMMES 2014-2020, MANAGED BY THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

IMPACT EVALUATION REPORT

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Afrit Ltd.

Budapeshta Str. 18
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria
+359 (0) 885 010 741
www.afrit.eu
office@afrit.eu

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ABBREVIATIONS

AR	Achieved Results
BG	Bulgaria
CA	Certifying Authority
CBC	Cross border cooperation
EC	European Commission
ER	Expected Results
EU	European Union
IF	Intervention fields
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
JMC	Joint Monitoring Committee
JS	Joint Secretariat
MA	Managing Authority
MIS	Management Information System
MK	Republic of North Macedonia
NA	National Authority
OI	Output indicators
PA	Priority axis
RI	Result indicators
RS	Republic of Serbia
SO	Specific objective
ToR	Terms of Reference
TR	Republic of Türkiye

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The new programming period for 2021 – 2027 introduces significant changes to the implementation and strategic approach. Nevertheless, it diligently assesses the accomplishments of the preceding (2014-2020) programming period in relation to project outputs, results, and impact. Consequently, this evaluation report offers a dual perspective, providing a retrospective view by documenting and evaluating the legacy of the IPA CBC Programmes (2014-2020), and concurrently, a forward-looking view by deriving valuable lessons to inform the next program period.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

The consultant's task is to evaluate the 2014-2020 programming period in which Bulgaria, along with neighbouring countries Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Türkiye, implemented the Interreg IPA Cross-border Cooperation Programmes, managed by the Republic of Bulgaria. The evaluation aims to assess the programs' impact on cross-border regional development and understand the mechanisms behind it.

The main objectives include analysing program output and result indicators and evaluating long-term impacts on the cross-border area, project partners, and target groups. Additionally, the evaluation seeks to propose recommendations for the 2021-2027 period based on lessons learned from the previous programs.

The evaluation principles involve identifying changes related to program objectives, estimating the impacts attributable to program implementation, and understanding effective and efficient implementation mechanisms.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY AND INTERVENTION DESCRIPTION

The evaluation design followed a non-experimental mixed-methods approach, aligning with three primary evaluation principles. The intervention, consisting of data collection methods and analysis are specified to assess programmes' impact.

Data collection involved several approaches:

- Desk research for analysis of strategic program documents, result and output indicators, and other relevant documents and statistical data on national level to assess the programmes' background and impact.
- Online surveys conducted with beneficiaries, aiming to gather information on specific program impacts and outcomes. The surveys received total of 85 respondents with an almost equal distribution for all three programmes, amounting to about 10% of all programme beneficiaries.
- Online surveys with managing bodies' representatives to gain insights into program implementation. The surveys received a total of 35 respondents.
- On-site focus groups for in-depth discussions with beneficiaries to understand program impacts. In total of 6 focus groups were conducted through the evaluation process.
- Online focus group for in-depth discussions with representatives of the managing bodies to understand programme mechanisms.

- Semi-structured individual interviews to explore specific projects, their project lifecycle and other factors contributing to the successful project implementation. In total 3 interviews were conducted.
- Case studies were employed to examine the entire project cycle, focusing on successful implementations. In total 8 case studies were created, one for each of the priority axes of the three programmes.

Data analysis was conducted at both primary and secondary levels. Desk research and statistical analysis were used to establish important evaluation variables and construct data collection tools, as well as provide statistical insight into the programmes' evolution. In the secondary analysis phase, qualitative and quantitative data were analysed to address the objectives and generate expert conclusions and recommendations.

Various analysis tools were employed, such as theory-based analysis, system and procedure analysis, comparative analysis, expert assessment, process and performance data analysis, counterfactual impact analysis, framework analysis, contribution analysis, and descriptive statistics.

MAJOR EVALUATION FINDINGS

The major evaluation findings are divided into the three evaluation principles to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evaluation results.

Identifying Changes

The Interreg IPA CBC programs have successfully promoted the development of cross-border regions across various dimensions, including social, cultural, environmental, and business aspects. The analysis of projects implemented during the 2014-2020 programming period has shown a significant and positive impact on sustainable regional development. The programs have consistently aligned with their strategic priorities, maintaining a thematic focus.

Budget reallocation in 2020 reflects the effective implementation of mechanisms for fund reallocation, responding to the region's evolving needs and ensuring optimal fund utilization. However, the data suggests a potential shortfall in per capita fund allocation, highlighting the need for progressively larger financial resources to sustain positive transformations in the long term.

Furthermore, there is a notable disparity where soft measure projects receive comparatively less funding for a larger number of projects, while investment projects secure significantly more funding for a smaller number of projects. Even though, this can be explained with the nature of the activities, **encouraging more comprehensive projects, which involve a larger scope of activities from both soft and investment measures**, could lead to a more effective resource allocation for larger programme impact.

On the other hand, the data concerning the attainment of **result indicators (RI) reveals that a significant number of these indicators have not only met but often exceeded their target values.** This observation suggests that the program has had a substantial and positive impact on the region's development right from the first call for proposals. Nevertheless,

program indicators **still face challenges in meeting the SMART principles**, hindering effective monitoring and measurement due to discrepancies between definition and measurement units.

Estimating Impacts

The analysis of the three Interreg IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 programmes, managed by the Republic of Bulgaria, reveals several key conclusions. Firstly, all **programs exhibit a strong commitment to aligning their efforts with the strategic objectives, as evidenced by the relevance of Specific Objectives (SOs) to Priority Axes (PAs).**

One common conclusion that applies to all three programs is the **concentration of resources in two primary areas: tourism and the environment.** This allocation reflects the high-priority needs of the regions and is in line with the program's strategies and feedback from target groups. However, an **overlap in thematic intervention fields** has been observed, which calls for a more precise and focused approach in future programming periods to better measure the program's impact and enhance efficiency. This approach has been already applied in the 2021 – 2027 programming period, as evident in the programme documents.

Regarding Output Indicators (OIs), the programs have achieved a high level of success. The majority of OIs have surpassed their targets, with some exceeding their expected results by over 50%. Additionally, a portion of OIs has been achieved slightly beyond their targets, indicating a realistic approach to planning at both the program and project levels. It is essential to consider the variability in achieving target values, which **highlights an opportunity for more precise planning with potentially higher target values in the future.**

Understanding Impacts

The evaluation of the Interreg IPA CBC 2014-2020 programs, managed by the Republic of Bulgaria, reveals valuable insights into their effectiveness and efficiency. When it comes to programme mechanisms, beneficiaries generally have a strong grasp of the Application Guidelines, **with low perceived risk in the application process, indicating a well-structured system.** While challenges in the application process are not significantly prevalent, there's a **growing concern about tight application deadlines, particularly for infrastructure projects.** The implementation phase presents some variances in feedback, with **issues regarding the FLC control process leading to payment delays.** However, the results of the projects are highly positive, with **sustainability and the generation of new ideas** for continuing their impact. **Effective communication and cooperation** between project beneficiaries and joint secretariats, along with flexibility in managing bodies during crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, have ensured project success. Overall, the programs have demonstrated their effectiveness in fostering sustainable regional development while highlighting areas for potential improvement to enhance their performance and impact.

Furthermore, the evaluation team **found high cohesion of the three IPA CBC programmes with relevant strategic documents** (e.g. Europe 2020 Strategy, EU strategy for Danube region, etc.), which highlights alignment with overall Union strategy towards regional development.

Additionally, the survey results indicate a positive shift in behavioural and tourism impacts compared to initial expectations, showcasing the programs' effectiveness. Unexpected impacts, such as positive social changes, signify **progress beyond predefined frameworks**.

On the other hand, research also indicated that **the impact varies among different types of organisations**. Smaller organisations, like NGOs, often undertaking soft projects, experience a less substantial impact, while larger capacity organisations, such as municipalities, with dedicated budgets for infrastructure and investment projects, have a more significant impact on the regions. In all cases, nonetheless, **beneficiaries are committed to maintaining project results** through equipment upkeep, maintenance of the infrastructure sites constructed, developed or rehabilitated with Programme funds, information dissemination, workshops, media exposure, and sharing best practices.

The programs have also led to external initiatives benefiting their communities, where survey **results emphasize improved organisational performance, enhanced competences and skills, and increased EU networking opportunities as significant program benefits**. Collaboration and networks formed across borders stand out as a key takeaway, with a **strong desire to sustain existing relationships and expand ongoing initiatives**.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- **Governance Capacity:** The programs have enhanced governance capacity through strategic documents, training, and networking.
- **Environmental Protection:** Efforts focus on protecting the environment, including disaster prevention and sustainable practices.
- **Tourism Development:** Heritage site restoration, improved accessibility, and visitor management boost tourism, increasing nights spent in the region.
- **Economic Development:** Businesses benefit from enhanced competitiveness, information systems, SME support, and cross-border networking.
- **Cultural Preservation:** Shared traditions and values are promoted through events.
- **Positive Results:** The programs have not only met but exceeded anticipated result and output indicators, substantially contributing to regional development and surpassing initial expectations.
- **Positive Impacts:** Organisations experience a significant positive shift in behavioural and social-related effects on the region's population, highlighting project effectiveness.
- **Beneficiary Gains:** Survey results reveal improved access to external investment, better organisational performance, enhanced competencies, evidence for policy and strategy decisions, EU and external network access, and an elevated EU community profile.
- **Collaboration, Networking and Relationship Building:** Programs break down communication barriers, fostering neighbourly relations, knowledge exchange, and valuable networking opportunities. Cross-border collaborative networks prove to continuously foster progress and development.
- **Commitment to Sustainability:** Organisations are dedicated to maintaining project results for long-term sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Sustainable Funding:** To address the increasing financial demands of the cross-border regions, it is essential to proactively allocate progressively larger funds in the future. This approach ensures the long-term sustainability of the positive changes achieved through these programs.
2. **Balanced Resource Allocation:** Encouraging more comprehensive projects, particularly those encompassing larger set of activities in both investment and soft measures, can lead to a more effective and efficient allocation of resources. This way a higher impact will be achieved through better funding absorption rate.
3. **Improved Monitoring and Evaluation:** To effectively gauge the impact of funded interventions, it is crucial to address refining the result indicators based on SMART principles to enable accurate measurement and monitoring of meaningful change. With this in mind, it is pertinent to develop an RI catalogue, which will support the whole project lifecycle and the programme respectively.
4. According to the EU's concept of implementing programs with a focus on a greater long-term effect, in the next period stricter requirements should be laid down for **taking measures for the sustainability of the projects**, which in turn would guarantee, already at the application stage, that a project can be self-sustaining or has a clear concept of
7. **Promote Knowledge Sharing:** Consideration should be given to facilitating knowledge sharing among program beneficiaries to exchange best practices and lessons learned. Creating a platform for collaboration, whether through the programmes' website and social media platforms and/ or organising in-person events to encourage discussion between beneficiaries to collaborate regarding their connected projects, can enhance project outcomes and encourage innovative approaches to address common challenges.
8. **Continuous Adaptability:** It is essential to maintain the programs' adaptability by reallocating resources based on achievements and shifting priorities. Continuously assessing the effectiveness of interventions to redirect funds to underperforming areas or emerging needs, will enhance the positive impact of the programmes on the regions.
9. **Address Application Deadlines:** Given the concerns regarding tight application deadlines, especially for investment projects, it is advisable to reconsider and potentially extend these deadlines for future programming periods. This adjustment can facilitate the preparation of necessary documents, reduce financial strain, and encourage more organisations to apply.
10. **Validation and Payment Processes:** To minimize delays and financial constraints for organisations,

continued viability after grant funding is exhausted.

- 5. Review Target Values:** Consideration should be given to reviewing and adjusting target values for Output Indicators. Where feasible, setting higher targets for OIs that have consistently exceeded expectations. This will provide a more challenging yet realistic benchmark for future projects.
- 6. Encourage Strategic Indicator Setting:** While the deliberate setting of conservative indicator values can be a strategic approach for project success, encouraging beneficiaries to set realistic yet ambitious targets will ensure accurate assessment while fostering project effectiveness.

improvements to either expedite the validation of funds and payment processes from 90 to 60 days and/ or increasing the advance payment percentage could be considered to alleviate these concerns.

- 11. Promote Cross-Border Collaboration:** The strong emphasis on collaborative networks formed across borders should be further encouraged and nurtured. Supporting organisations in sustaining existing relationships and expanding their initiatives will contribute to more effective regional development.

INTRODUCTION

The INTERREG IPA Cross-border Cooperation Programmes, managed by Republic of Bulgaria are supported by the European Union (EU) Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II).

The main objective of IPA II is to aid candidate countries and potential candidate countries in aligning their standards and policies with those of the EU. Within this framework, the cross-border cooperation (CBC), component of IPA, aims to foster stability, security, and prosperity among the participating countries. It emphasizes promoting good neighbourly relations and encouraging harmonious, balanced, and sustainable development.

Each programme acknowledges the challenges faced by border regions, which frequently contend with disadvantages stemming from their peripheral geographical positions and their relative isolation from national economies. Concurrently, the evolution of the European Union's internal market, along with the core principles of free movement for people, goods, services, and capital, underscores the imperative for sustainable and equitable development, as well as the integration of the entire European territory.

For the programming period 2014-2020, Republic of Bulgaria and its neighbouring IPA beneficiary countries have been jointly implementing:

- Bulgaria – Serbia Interreg - IPA Cross-border Programme 2014-2020;
- Bulgaria – North Macedonia Interreg - IPA Cross-border Programme 2014-2020;
- Bulgaria – Türkiye Interreg- IPA Cross-border Programme 2014-2020.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVE OF THE IMPACT EVALUATION

The Consultant's assignment has the scope of conducting a comprehensive evaluation on the programming period 2014 – 2020 during which the Republic of Bulgaria and its neighbouring IPA beneficiary countries – Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye, have been jointly implementing IPA Cross-border Programmes 2014-2020, managed by the Republic of Bulgaria.

The main goal of the current evaluation is assessing the effects of the Programmes' implementation to the cross-border regional development and analysing the mechanism of producing impact. Hereafter are the two main objectives of the evaluation:

“To perform impact evaluation of the Interreg-IPA Cross-border Programmes 2014-2020, managed by Bulgaria through elaboration of an analysis of the level of achievement of programmes output and result indicators and their compliance with the set programmes' targets; a thorough analysis of long-term impacts of Programmes' interventions on the cross-border area, project partners and target groups.”

“To propose recommendations for the implementation of the Programmes for the 2021-2027 period through summarizing lessons learned from Programmes/projects implementation 2014-2020.”

In order to find the best methods to achieve those set goals, the following three main evaluation principles and their respective questions were followed:

Evaluation Principle 1. Identifying Changes: What change can be observed in relation to the objectives of the Programme?

Evaluation Principle 2. Estimating impacts: To what extent can the observed changes be attributed to the implementation of the Programme?

Evaluation Principle 3. Understanding impacts and showing what works best in terms of effectiveness and efficiency: What mechanisms of Programme implementation have delivered the observed impact?

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation methodology is following a non-experimental mixed-methods approach. The planned methods for data collection and analysis are defined in relation to the three main evaluation principles and the evaluation questions (ToR, ch. 4.2 “Specific work”) and applied in the analysis of the Programmes’ priority axis (PA), specific objectives (SO) and result indicators (RI). The consultant has gone further in specifying the evaluation principles by giving context to the questions, detailed explanation of data collection source and data collection tool to be used in answering the set questions and achieving the objectives of this evaluation. The following table presents the methodology that has been followed during the impact evaluation.

Table 1 - Methodology Framework

	Data Source	Data Collection Method
1. Identifying changes: What change can be observed in relation to the objectives of the programme?		
Assess the extent to which the programme has achieved its intended objectives	Strategic program documents Result Indicators Managing bodies Annual Reports NSI Data	Desk Research Surveys Focus Groups Case studies
Determine the specific changes and advancements observed as a result of the programme		
Identify the key areas where the programme has made a tangible impact on cross-border cooperation and development		
2. Estimating impacts: To what extent can the observed changes be attributed to the implementation of the programme?		
Evaluate the extent to which the observed changes can be attributed directly to the implementation of the programme.	Output indicators Project analysis	Desk Research Case studies
Assess the overall effectiveness of the programme in achieving its desired outcomes and impacts.		

	Data Source	Data Collection Method
3. Understanding impacts and showing what works best in terms of effectiveness and efficiency: What mechanisms of programme implementation have delivered the observed impact?		
Examine the mechanisms and strategies employed during the programme implementation that have contributed to the observed impact.	Projects Managing Bodies Beneficiaries	Desk Research Interviews, Surveys, Focus groups
Identify the most effective and efficient approaches or practices		
Identify any external factors or alternative explanations that may have influenced the observed changes, apart from the programme implementation		

INTERVENTION DESCRIPTION

DATA COLLECTION

The data collection process used five different methods. **Desk research** was used to acquire information related to the programme, its objectives, strategy and results. During this stage of the data collection process, statistical data was gathered regarding the output indicators, budget distribution and overall programme results. The research encompassed all document sources of secondary information listed in Annex 1.

Furthermore, a **digital survey** was distributed by e-mail among the beneficiaries for each respective programme in three languages – English, Bulgarian and the official language of the IPA beneficiary country for which the survey was made. The surveys in total received 85 responses, which amounts to about 10% of all beneficiaries during this programming period. Detailed information about the participants’ demographics and survey results can be found in Annexes 2.1 – 2.3.

A digital survey was distributed to all representatives of the managing bodies to further investigate and answer the evaluation objectives. It used the working language of this assignment – English, and was delivered to all representatives through the Managing Authority’s channels. It received 34 responses in total by representatives of the MA, NA and JS. Detailed information about the participants’ demographics and survey results can be found in Annex 2.4.

Following the survey, on-site **focus groups** were conducted. The focus groups were semi-structured and aimed at obtaining maximum and in-depth knowledge through discussions and debate about the perceptions, insights, attitudes, experiences of the participants with regards to each Program and their realistic impact. In total six focus groups were conducted between July and September 2023, with two for each programme – one with the Bulgarian

beneficiaries and one with the beneficiaries of the respective IPA neighbouring country. Furthermore, one online focus group with representatives of the managing bodies on October 5, 2023 Annex 3 shows the questions guide followed during the events, participants list and a summary of all answers organised among themes. Moreover, the semi-structured **individual interviews** allowed for more in-depth responses that helped the Consultant gain a broader view over the programme’s implementation, hence provide a more coherent evaluation conclusions and recommendations. The interviews followed the same questions guide as the focus groups. Detailed information about the outcomes of the interviews can be found in Annex 3.

There were three interviews conducted during this stage of data collection – two for the BG-MK programme and one for the BG-RS programme. The interviews were done with both the Bulgarian partners and partners from the Republic of North Macedonia of project 2.31.074 “Revitalization and management of traditional products in transborder area by local market's organisations”. The last interview was done with the Bulgarian partner of project CB007.2.32.170 “For everyone saved a tree (FOREST)”.

To explore qualitative impact and research on some of the management and operational aspects of the programs, the Consultant made use of **case studies**. The focus fell on observing the whole project cycle. The projects were selected based on level of successful implementation and budget. The Consultant aimed at exploring a project in each of the PAs for better overview of the programmes, which resulted in 8 case studies in total (Annex 4).

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis process was done on two levels – primary and secondary. In the primary analysis stage, the desk research, together with statistical analysis of the programmes’ results and specific projects were used in order to determine the variables important for the current evaluation and provide a background for development of the data collection tools.

During the secondary level of data analysis both qualitative and quantitative data were analysed in order to form answers to the set objectives and, together with the primary analysis, construct expert conclusions and recommendations.

The following tools were used during the analysis phase of the evaluation:

- Theory-Based Analysis
- Analysis of system and procedures
- Comparative analysis/Analysis of change
- Expert assessment
- Process and performance data analysis (process evaluation)
- Counterfactual impact analysis
- Framework analysis
- Contribution Analysis
- Descriptive statistics

FINDINGS AND ANSWERS TO THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The following chapter presents the research findings and answers to the evaluation questions as ordered afore in Ch. “Evaluation Design”.

IDENTIFYING CHANGES: WHAT CHANGE CAN BE OBSERVED IN RELATION TO THE OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAMME?

As mentioned afore in this document, the main strategic objective of the programmes is to enhance the development of the regions through social, cultural, environmental and business-related aspects.

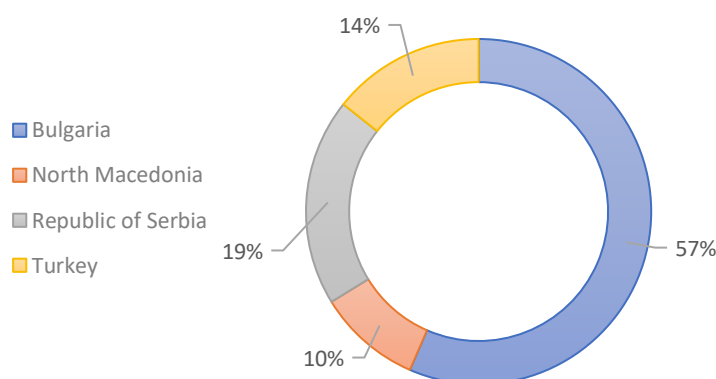
The programme addresses the following NUTS III regions for Bulgaria and its IPA beneficiary countries.

Table 2 NUTS III. Programme area

BG – MK	BG – RS	BG – TR
Bulgaria <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kyustendil ▪ Blagoevgrad 	Bulgaria <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vidin ▪ Montana ▪ Vratsa ▪ Sofia ▪ Pernik ▪ Kyustendil 	Bulgaria <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bourgas ▪ Yambol ▪ Haskovo
North Macedonia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ North-East ▪ East ▪ South-East 	Serbia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bor ▪ Zajecar ▪ Nis ▪ Pirot ▪ Toplica ▪ Jablanica ▪ Pcinja 	Türkiye <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kırklareli ▪ Edirne

Source: Programme

Graph 1 Population of the CBC regions by Country



The total population of the area covered by the IPA CBC programmes, managed by Republic of Bulgaria is 5,392,126 inhabitants based on latest NSI and Eurostat data from 2022.

In order to address the needs of the cross-border areas, the Managing Authority have carefully

developed a set of priority axes (PA) and their respective specific objectives (SO), under which

a total of 286 projects were executed for the whole programming period and all three programmes. Of those, 129 were implemented under the first call for proposals, 156 under the second call for proposals and lastly, one project was implemented under a restricted third call for the Bulgaria – Türkiye programme. When surveyed the representatives of all managing bodies – Managing Authority, National Authority and Joint Secretariats, expressed a positive level of relevance of the SOs to the regions (average of 4.66 out of 5), which is also later confirmed during all focus groups with beneficiaries.

Initially the funding, union and national counterpart support combined, allocated for all three programmes was € 83 206 865,89. In 2020, a reallocation of funds was necessitated reflecting the expected size of the actions for improvement of the regions. The new total of funding was set at € 83 206 842.

Table 3 Funding allocation

Programme	Priority Axis	Funding 2014	allocation	Funding reallocation 2020	
IPA CBC BG – MK 2014 – 2020	PA 1. Environment	€ 6 811 592	35%	€ 7 392 274	38%
	PA 2. Tourism	€ 7 784 676	40%	€ 8 083 995	42%
	PA 3. Competitiveness	€ 2 919 253	15%	€ 2 039 252	10%
IPA CBC BG – RS 2014 – 2020	PA 1. Tourism	€ 13 640 900,71	40%	€ 11 935 790	35%
	PA 2. Youth	€ 6 820 450,35	20%	€ 8 525 565	25%
	PA 3. Environment	€ 10 230 675,53	30%	€ 10 230 676	30%
IPA CBC BG – TR 2014 - 2020	PA 1. Environment	€ 13 339 302,35	45%	€ 12 415 309	42%
	PA 2. Sustainable tourism	€ 13 339 302,35	45%	€ 14 263 297	48%

Source: Programme

For all three programmes the funding related to **PA “Technical assistance”** amounts to **10%**. The changes witnessed in 2020 attest to the successful implementation of reallocation mechanisms, which are rooted in the adjustments made throughout the program's course. This approach enables more effective addressing of the region's needs and facilitates the funding of projects that offer new solutions. Furthermore, this dynamic adaptation of resources fosters a nimble response to emerging challenges and opportunities in the region. It exemplifies a commitment to ensuring that the allocated funds are optimally utilized for the benefit of the community.

On another note, when observing the budget distribution by total region population (as seen in following table), several conclusions can be drawn.

Table 4 Funding per capita

<i>Programme</i>	<i>Region population (total for both countries)</i>	<i>Total funding (2020, excluding PA “Technical assistance”)</i>	<i>Funding per capita</i>
IPA CBC BG – MK 2014 – 2020	930 915	€ 19 144 645,75	€ 20,57
IPA CBC BG – RS 2014 – 2020	3 247 706	€ 36 310 073,34	€ 11,18
IPA CBC BG – TR 2014 – 2020	1 512 807	€ 28 656 334,55	€ 18,94

Source: Programme; NSI; Eurostat

The significant and positive impact of all three programs on the sustainable regional development, spanning social, cultural, environmental, and business-related dimensions, cannot be denied. These initiatives have played a crucial role in enhancing the overall well-being of the regions involved. However, it has become increasingly apparent that the fund allocation per capita, while essential, may not be sufficient to sustain the long-term impact of these projects. Despite the incremental growth in funding from one programming period to the next – with the 2007-2013 period featuring smaller funds than the 2014-2020 cycle, and the latest programming period (2021-2027) also witnessing an increase in financial allocation – the analyzed data highlights a growing need for progressively larger financial resources in the future. This is necessary to adequately address the multifaceted needs of the cross-border regions, which encompass a vast and diverse geographical area.

To ensure that the positive changes and advancements achieved through these programs continue to thrive and positively impact these regions, it is essential to consider the evolving demands and challenges they face. A proactive approach that acknowledges the growing financial requirements and seeks to align funding with the unique needs of each region will be crucial in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the positive transformations brought about by these cross-border initiatives. This approach not only recognizes the successes of the past but also anticipates the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead, providing a solid foundation for continued regional development and cooperation in the years to come.

In this context, Bulgaria, as an EU member, possesses more extensive options for financing interventions. However, many beneficiaries on the Bulgarian side are small organisations that face challenges in securing substantial funding and lack adequate budgets for self-financing, underscoring the significance of INTERREG programs. Similarly, in partner countries like Serbia, Türkiye, and Republic of North Macedonia, INTERREG stands as one of the few sources providing necessary grant-in-aid, primarily for small organisations unable to self-finance similar interventions. It can be inferred that the Bulgarian territories, owing to their greater access to financial resources, exhibit better development and demonstrate more significant economic progress. On the other hand, the regions of the other countries, with the exception of Türkiye, display comparatively slower rates of economic growth and immediate

development. Consequently, fostering regional cross-border cohesion demands increased investment to yield more impactful outcomes.

In order to further investigate the successful application of funds for improvement of the regions during the 2014 – 2020 programming period, the Consultant has made an analysis of the projects implemented for all three programmes during the programming period.

Table 5 Funding allocation by projects and PA

Programme	Priority Axis		Projects (number)	Funds (verified amounts)
IPA CBC BG – MK 2014 – 2020	PA 1. Environment	Soft	8	€ 843 931.49
		Investment	19	€ 7 400 324.55
		Total	27	€ 8 244 256.04
	PA 2. Tourism	Soft	14	€ 1 491 935.06
		Investment	16	€ 7 231 806.32
		Total	30	€ 8 723 741.38
	PA 3. Competitiveness	Soft	21	€ 2 176 648.33
		Investment	-	€ -
		Total	21	€ 2 176 648.33
IPA CBC BG – RS 2014 – 2020	PA 1. Sustainable tourism	Soft	28	€ 4 175 038.8
		Investment	18	€ 10 750 669.31
		Total	46	€ 14 925 708.11
	PA 2. Youth	Soft	22	€ 3 013 748.46
		Investment	8	€ 4 499 119.94
		Total	30	€ 7 512 868.40
	PA 3. Environment	Soft	6	€ 907 101.07
		Investment	24	€ 12 964 395.76
		Total	30	€ 13 871 496.83
IPA CBC BG – TR 2014 – 2020	PA 1. Environment	Soft	14	€ 1 465 649.83
		Investment	20	€ 11 729 086.91
		Total	34	€ 13 194 736.74
	PA 2. Sustainable tourism	Soft	41	€ 3 603 881.73
		Investment	26	€ 11 774 830.5
		Total	67	€ 15 378 712.23

Source: MIS

Regarding the distribution of projects across the Programmes' priorities, the comparative analysis conducted highlights a strong alignment with the Programmes' strategic approach.

In all three Programmes, the established priorities exhibit a thematic orientation, encompassing both investment and soft measures across various intervention areas. However, a different pattern emerges within specific objectives, such as under PA 2 (BG-MK), where SO 2.1 exclusively features investment projects, while SO 2.2 and SO 2.3 solely comprise soft projects.

Additionally, a noticeable trend is the discrepancy in funding allocation, where soft measure projects receive comparatively less funding for a greater number of projects, while investment projects secure significantly more funding for a smaller number of projects. This can be attributed to the inherent nature of the projects and the varying funding requirements for different activities. Nonetheless, promoting a more equitable approach involves encouraging comprehensive projects that integrate both soft and investment measures. However, the compatibility of this approach with the designated priority axis, its specific objectives, and the primary issues and challenges it aims to address should be thoroughly evaluated. An intentional integration of soft and investment measures within a single project would foster more multifaceted, tangible, and sustainable transformations, as distinct activities can be recognized as diverse tools working toward a unified outcome.

Nonetheless, all three programmes have achieved positive outcomes in executing their desired targets. The tool to measure this success and answer to the evaluation questions set in the ToR is none other than the result indicators (RI) set for each of the SOs. Even though, the official data related to the final result of the RIs in 2023 is not available at the time of the evaluation, several meaningful conclusions can be taken into account after reviewing the 2018 progress and keeping in mind the progression of the output indicators (reviewed further in the report).

Table 6 RI Achievement

RI	Measurement	Baseline Value	Target Value	2018	% of achievement
<i>IPA CBC BG – MK 2014 – 2020</i>					
1.1.1 Increased level of capacity in environment protection and sustainable use of common natural resources.	Scale	2.56	3.00	2.82	94%
1.2.1 Increased joint interventions in the field of risk prevention and management	%	6	80%	100%	125%
1.2.2 Increased joint initiatives related to risk prevention and management	%	30	20%	27%	135%
2.1.1 Increased nights spent in the cross-border region	%	1 618 655	1%	2 081 914	128,6%
2.2.1 Increased level of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area	Scale	2.44	3	2.69	89,7%

2.3.1 Increased public awareness regarding sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage and resources	Scale	2.49	3.00	2.73	91%
3.1.1 Increased cross-border business networks created or extended	%	29	10%	47	162%
3.1.2 Increased level of awareness on the business opportunities offered by the region	Scale	2.34	3.00	2.64	88%
<u>IPA CBC BG – RS 2014 – 2020</u>					
1.1.1 Increased nights spent in the cross-border region	%	642 269 (2013*)	1%	916 236	142,7%
1.2.1 Increased level of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area	Scale	2.12	2.50	2.82	184,2%
1.3.1 Increased public awareness regarding sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage and resources	Scale	3.02	3.50	3.05	6,2%
2.1.1 Level of young people's satisfaction as regards opportunities for professional and social realization in the border area	Scale	2.42	3.00	2.84	72,4%
2.2.1 Increased level of youth involvement in networks across the border	Scale	2.45	3.00	2.55	18,2%
3.1.1 Increased level of preparedness to manage risks of transitional dimensions	Scale	1.90	2.50	2.33	71,7%
3.2.1 Increased capacity for nature protection and sustainable use of common natural resources in the border region	Scale	2.13	2.50	2.34	56,8%
<u>IPA CBC BG – TR 2014 – 2020</u>					
1.1 Increased level of preparedness to manage emergency situations in the cross-border area (qualitative target)	Scale	2.24	2.50	2.64	333,3%
1.2 Increased capacity level for nature protection, sustainable use and management of common natural resources (qualitative target)	Scale	2.66	3.00	2.82	47,1%
2.1 Increased nights spent in the cross-border area (quantitative target)	%	7 721 074 (2012)	min 1% increase	10 308 550	133,5%
2.2. Increased level of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area (qualitative target)	Scale	2.50	3.00	2.67	34,0%

2.3 Increased level of awareness about sustainable tourism development in the cross-border area (qualitative target)	Scale	2.77	3.00	2.99	95,7%
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Source: Annual reports

Based on the 2018 data concerning the attainment of the result indicators (RI), it becomes evident that a significant number of these indicators have not only met but often exceeded their target values. This observation implies that the program has made a substantial and positive impact on the region's development right from the first call for proposals.

An important insight gleaned from the comprehensive analysis of all projects and the output indicators (OI) within each program is that the financial mechanisms for fund allocation in the second call have significantly contributed to the continued advancement of the program's overarching goals. This is particularly evident in cases where certain RIs have been overachieved, as these excess funds are effectively redirected toward other projects that are instrumental in addressing RIs that are still in progress or require further development. This strategic reallocation of resources underscores the program's adaptability and its commitment to achieving its objectives in a dynamic and responsive manner.

On the other hand, the IPA CBC Programmes 2014-2020, under the administration of the Republic of Bulgaria, were designed to operate across a wide array of priority areas in line with European Commission guidelines and regulations. Consequently, these programs encompassed numerous sectors and maintained a broad scope without clear prioritization or a strong results-oriented focus. Despite some improvements over time in the measurement of program indicators, they continue to fall short of meeting the SMART principles and have been inadequately calculated. Result indicators are often considered inadequate and, in certain cases, inappropriate, sometimes measuring outputs rather than genuine results. This inadequacy in indicators poses a hindrance to effective monitoring and measurement. A fundamental issue lies in the disconnect between the definition and measurement units, making it challenging to accurately gauge the impact of funded interventions in terms of instigating meaningful change.

Following the above analysis, a closer look is taken into each SO for all three programmes and its respective RIs to find answers to the evaluation questions related to the first evaluation principle “Identifying changes” (listed in ToR, ch. 4.2 “Specific work”).

IPA CBC Bulgaria – Republic of North Macedonia 2014 - 2020

(SO 1.1) What change can be observed in the programme area in the level of capacity in environmental protection and sustainable use of common natural resources?

SO 1.1 “Environmental protection and sustainable use of the common natural resources of the CBC area” aims to bolster natural areas and address negative environmental trends, including urbanization and intensified agriculture. To measure the change observed in the level of capacity in environmental protection and sustainable use of common natural resources, the evaluation team observed the progression of RI 1.1.1 “Increased level of capacity in environment protection and sustainable use of common natural resources”.

Out of the 11 projects implemented in the first call, 94% of the indicator has already been achieved, accounting for 84.6% of the total projects implemented. From a statistical perspective, the remaining 2 projects from the second call for project proposals are expected to fulfill the indicator's requirements. Moreover, the projects encompass distinct measures, such as investment measures, involving acquisition of specialised equipment, execution of construction and assembly activities; soft measures including strengthening sustainable environmental practices, development of methodological documents, training programmes, etc.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 1.1 collectively contribute to achieving the specific objective of enhancing the community's capacity for sustainable environmental practices and addressing environmental challenges in the region.

(SO 1.2) What change can be observed in the programme area in relation to the joint interventions in the field of prevention and mitigation of consequences of natural and man-caused disasters of cross-border dimension and impact?

The program recognizes that floods and fires represent typical CBC concerns and it is imperative to take action and mitigate flood and fire risks by fostering genuine cross-border cooperation. To address the pressing needs, the programme identified SO 1.2 “Prevention and mitigation of consequences of natural and man caused disasters of cross-border dimension and impact”. To measure change, two RIs were identified:

- RI 1.2.1 “Increased joint interventions in the field of risk prevention and management”
- RI 1.2.2 “Increased joint initiatives related to risk prevention and management”

Out of the 3 projects implemented in the first call, an achievement of 125% for RI 1.2.1 and 135% for RI 1.2.2 has already been realized, constituting 21.4% of the total projects implemented. From a statistical perspective, the remaining 11 projects from the second call for project proposals are anticipated to achieve an even higher level of overachievement for the indicator. Furthermore, the projects encompass distinct measures, such as investment measures, involving acquisition of specialised equipment; flood and fire protection measures and measures for early disaster warning; soft measures including development of methodological documents, training programmes, etc.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 1.1 collectively contribute to substantial enhancements in transnational prevention and mitigation of consequences stemming from natural and human-induced disasters.

(SO 2.1) What change can be observed in the level of tourist attractiveness of the cross-border region?

The intrinsic connection between tourism and the natural and cultural heritage within the Program area stands as a pivotal factor in enhancing the allure of the border region for tourists. To address the pressing needs, the programme identified SO 2.1 “Enhancing the tourism potential of the region through cooperation initiatives in better preservation and

sustainable utilisation of natural and cultural heritage”. RI 2.1.1 “Increased nights spent in the cross-border region” is used in order to measure change.

Out of the 9 projects implemented in the first call, the indicator has achieved 128.6% of its target value. The remaining 7 projects from the second call are expected to further increase this value. An increase in nights spend is also evident in data obtained from NSI and Eurostat (table 7). On the other hand, the projects under SO 2.1 encompass distinct types of measures including restoration efforts for heritage buildings and maintenance of traditional landscapes, improved accessibility to tourist sites and effective visitor management plans to safeguard the natural and cultural resources of the region.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 2.1 collectively contribute to substantial enhancements in increasing the cross-border tourism potential by developing common destinations.

(SO 2.2) What change can be observed in the level of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area?

The program aims to realize another essential outcome: enhancing the potential for sustainable tourism services in the CBC (Cross-Border Cooperation) region. This is reflected in SO 2.2 “Raising the competitiveness of the CBC region’s tourism offer” and measured by RI 2.2.1 “Increased level of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area”.

Out of the 6 projects implemented in the first call, the indicator has achieved 89.7% of its target value. The rest 10.3% is expected to be achieved after the final assessment of RIs in 2023 as there is one project under this objective during the second call for proposals. Nonetheless, the projects under SO 2.2 encompass distinct types of measures including increase in the tourism attractiveness and visibility through digitalization of natural sites, events and marketing campaigns promoting the assets of the tourism area, improving employment capacity and establishing long-term cooperation between tourist actors.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 2.2 collectively contribute to enhancement in the level of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area.

(SO 2.3) What change can be observed in the level of public awareness regarding sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage and resources?

The program recognizes accommodation, events, and cultural activities as one of the main tourist products to play a pivotal role in safeguarding destinations from decline. Therefore, the competitiveness of Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) destinations can only be sustained or enhanced when various stakeholders in the border region collaborate and work in unison, which is reflected in SO 2.3 “Promoting cooperation among regional actors in the area of sustainable tourism”. To measure the success of the measures, the programme identified RI

2.3.1 “Increased public awareness regarding sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage and resources”.

Out of the 2 projects implemented in the first call, the indicator has achieved 91% of its target value. The remaining 5 projects from the second call are expected to further increase and even overreach the target value, which will become evident when the 2023 program report is published. Moreover, there are several distinct types of measures within the projects, which further enhance the SO, including identifying and promoting sustainable utilisation of natural and cultural heritage assets, promoting the cooperation between respective regional actors, organisation of training sessions, cultural events and more.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 2.3 collectively contribute to enhancement in the level of public awareness regarding sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage and resources.

(SO 3.1) What change can be observed in relation to cross-border business networks created or extended?

Cooperation and the exchange of experiences across various sectors, such as agriculture, renewable energy sources (RES), and tourism, are instrumental in strengthening economic activities and regional competitiveness. This collaborative approach enhances the region's capacity to thrive and is reflected in SO 3.1 “Improving the competitiveness of regional businesses”. To measure the success of the measures, the programme identified:

- 3.1.1 “Increased cross-border business networks created or extended”
- 3.1.2 “Increased level of awareness on the business opportunities offered by the region”

Out of the 17 projects implemented in the first call, an achievement of 162% for RI 1.3.1 and 88% for RI 1.2.2 is observed, constituting 81% of the total projects implemented. From a statistical perspective, the remaining 4 projects from the second call for project proposals are anticipated to achieve, and even exceed, the expected results under the RIs. Moreover, there are several distinct types of measures within the projects, which further enhance the SO, including incorporation of marketing strategies for the region's development, organisation of thematic networking events and entrepreneurship hubs, training sessions and development of strategic documents and methodologies supporting the region's business sectors.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 3.1 collectively contribute to enhancement in relation to cross-border business networks created or extended.

IPA CBC Bulgaria – Serbia 2014 - 2020

(SO 1.1) What change can be observed in enhancing the tourism attractiveness of the cross-border region in view of diversification of tourist product(s) achieved through cooperation?

The development of sustainable cross-border tourism is recognized in the program strategy as a pivotal driver of socio-economic growth and a key factor in enhancing the competitiveness of the Program's region. There is a fundamental need to create compelling

tourist attractions by harnessing the cultural, historical, and natural resources within the region in a balanced manner. This is reflected in SO 1.1 “Tourist attractiveness: Supporting the development of competitive tourist attractions achieved through cooperation, thus contributing to the diversification of tourist product(s) in the cross-border region”. RI 1.1.1 “Increased nights spent in the cross-border region” is used to measure the observed change.

Out of the 12 projects implemented in the first call, the indicator has already surpassed the target results (142.7% achievement), accounting for 66.7% of the total projects implemented. An increase in nights spend is also evident in data obtained from NSI and Eurostat (table 7). The remaining 6 projects from the second call can only increase the indicator’s value when the 2023 program report is published. Furthermore, there are several distinct types of measures within the projects, which further enhance the SO, including conservation of natural and cultural heritage, measures for enhancing transportation in the region, development of methodological and strategic documents and implementation of training programs.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 1.1 collectively contribute to enhanced the tourism attractiveness of the cross-border region.

(SO 1.2) What change can be observed in capturing economic benefits from development of natural and cultural heritage in the border area through creating common cross-border touristic destination(s)?

The program acknowledges the contemporary global competitive landscape in the field of tourism development, emphasizing the importance of knowledge, innovation, and effective promotion. This assertion is reflected in SO 1.2 “Cross-border touristic product: Capturing economic benefits from development of natural and cultural heritage in the border area through creating common cross-border touristic destination(s)”. RI 1.2.1 “Increased level of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area” is used to measure the observed change.

With the 2 projects under the first call for proposals RI 1.2.1 achieved 184,2% of its target. It can be concluded that by the time of the 2023 program report, the remaining 10 projects will only contribute to an even higher result. There are also several distinct types of measures within the projects, which further enhance the SO, including the development of methodological and strategic documents for sustainable tourism and preservation of natural and cultural heritage, as well as organisation of training programmes.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 1.2 collectively contribute to in capturing economic benefits from development of natural and cultural heritage in the border area.

(SO 1.3) What change can be observed in the field of capitalizing the effect of cultural, historical and natural heritage tourism on border communities?

The program acknowledges that sustainable tourism development in the eligible border area is contingent upon active engagement from a diverse range of stakeholders within and at the regional and border level. Leveraging the opportunities presented by dynamic cross-border cooperation is paramount in this regard, which is reflected in SO 1.3 “People-to-people networking: Capitalising the effect of cultural, historical and natural heritage tourism on border communities through common actions”. RI 1.3.1 “Increased public awareness regarding sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage and resources” is used to measure the observed change.

The target for the result indicator remains unmet at present with only 6,2% of achievement, primarily due to a shortage of projects during the first call. Nonetheless, there are 16 projects from the second call which outcomes will provide valuable insights into the impact of this specific objective on the region, which will be reflected in the final 2023 programme report.

Nonetheless, there is evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them. There are several distinct types of measures within the individual projects, which further enhance the SO, including implementation of a variety of promotional/ networking event and other marketing strategies, organisation of training programmes and development of relevant strategic documents. The activities under SO 1.3 collectively contribute to capitalizing the effect of cultural, historical and natural heritage tourism on border communities.

(SO 2.1) What change can be observed in the level of professional and social realisation of young people in the border area?

The program recognizes the importance of creating an attractive environment for the advancement of young people in the border region. This is reflected in SO 2.1 “Skills & entrepreneurship: Supporting the development of attractive environment for advancement of young people in the border region achieved through cooperation”. The observed change is measured with RI 2.1.1 “Level of young people's satisfaction as regards opportunities for professional and social realization in the border area”.

Out of the 10 projects implemented in the first call, the indicator has achieved 72,4% of its desired end value. The remaining 1 project from the second call is expected to cover the rest 27,6% to fully achieve the RIs target, which will become evident when the 2023 program report is published. There are also several distinct types of measures within the projects, which further enhance the SO, including but not limited to organisation of events/ counselling sessions promoting entrepreneurial culture and initiating various sporting activities.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 2.1 collectively contribute to enhancements in the level of professional and social realisation of young people in the border area.

(SO 2.2) What change can be observed in the level of youth involvement in networks across the border?

The program strongly emphasizes the importance of involving young people in decision-making processes, recognizing the far-reaching impact it can have on their personal development and their sense of responsibility toward their communities. This is reflected in SO 2.2 “People-to-people networking: Promote cooperation initiatives for and with young people, thus enhancing mobility of young people across borders”. To measure the observed change, RI 2.2.1 “Increased level of youth involvement in networks across the border” is used.

Out of the 10 projects implemented in the first call, the indicator has achieved 18.2% of its desired target value with 10.5% of the projects under SO 2.2. After observation of the remaining 17 projects from the second call, they are expected to cover or even exceed the rest 71.8% to fully achieve the RIs target. There are also several distinct types of measures within the projects, which further enhance the SO, including but not limited to implementing advocacy and good governance campaigns focused on young adults, establishment of better educational and informational systems in the region, creating opportunities for young volunteers and promoting communication between young individuals through media campaigns.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 2.2 collectively contribute to enhancements in the level of youth involvement in networks across the border.

(SO 3.1) What change can be observed in the level of preparedness to manage risks of transnational dimension?

The program acknowledges the paramount importance of disaster prevention, management, and climate change adaptation, particularly at the local and regional levels. Therefore, it is also reflected in SO 3.1 “Joint risk management: To prevent and mitigate the consequences of natural and man-made cross-border disasters”. To measure the observed change RI 3.1.1 “Increased level of preparedness to manage risks of transitional dimensions” is used.

Out of the 9 projects implemented in the first call amounting to 69.2% of all projects, the indicator has achieved 71.7% of its desired end value. The remaining 4 projects from the second call are expected to cover the rest 28.4% to fully achieve the RIs target. There are also several distinct types of measures within the projects, which further enhance the SO, including but not limited to procurement of specialized equipment, flood and fire protection measures and measures for early disaster warning, as well as development of training programmes and strategic documents.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 3.1 collectively contribute to enhancements in the level of preparedness to manage risks of transnational dimension.

(SO 3.2) What change can be observed in the capacity for nature protection and sustainable use of common natural resources in the border region?

The program acknowledges the significant advantages associated with the expansive and diverse natural environment within the eligible border area. This region boasts a rich blend of natural assets, including diverse flora and fauna, pristine rivers, and extensive forests, offering untapped potential. However, the full scope of these natural resources has not yet been realized. This emerging need is addressed in SO 3.2 “Nature protection: Promoting and enhancing the utilization of common natural resources, as well as stimulating nature protection in the programme area, through joint initiatives across the border”. To measure the observed change over the programming period, RI 3.2.1 “Increased capacity for nature protection and sustainable use of common natural resources in the border region” is used.

Out of the 3 projects implemented in the first call, amounting to 18.75% of all projects, the indicator has achieved 56.8% of its desired end value. The remaining 14 projects from the second call are expected to cover and even exceed the rest 43.2% to fully achieve the RIs target, which is also observed in the output indicators. There are also several distinct types of measures within the projects, which further enhance the SO, including implementation of joint interventions for nature protection and preservation, organisation of specialized events and training sessions and development of strategic and methodological documents.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 3.2 collectively contribute to enhancements in the capacity for nature protection and sustainable use of common natural resources in the border region.

IPA CBC Bulgaria – Türkiye 2014 - 2020

(SO 1.1) What change can be observed in the programme area in relation to the level of preparedness to manage emergency situations in the cross-border area?

As outlined in the program strategy, flooding and forest fire events are typical issues for the CBC region due to its heightened vulnerability to the escalating impacts of climate change. To address this issue, the programme developed SO 1.1 “Preventing and mitigating the consequences of natural and man-made disasters in the cross-border area”. RI 1.1 “Increased level of preparedness to manage emergency situations in the cross-border area” is used to measure the observed change over the programming period.

Out of the 7 projects implemented in the first call, the indicator has already surpassed its target by achieving 333.3% of the expected results, accounting for 70% of the total projects implemented. The remaining 3 projects from the second call can only increase the indicator’s value. There are also several distinct types of measures within the projects, which further enhance the SO, including investment measures, involving the acquisition of specialized equipment and/or the execution of sanitation of riverbanks/ forests and reforestation, as well as measures for disaster monitoring and early warning systems.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 1.1 collectively contribute to enhancements in the level of preparedness to manage emergency situations in the cross-border area.

(SO 1.2) What change can be observed in the programme area in relation to the level of capacity for nature protection, sustainable use and management of common natural resources in the cross-border area?

The program acknowledges that both countries have a history of environmental protection efforts, including the establishment of protected areas, despite facing growing environmental challenges due to various economic activities in the cross-border region. Consequently, these economic activities have led to an increase in adverse environmental impacts, which have consistently worsened local pollution levels. This growing concern is addressed by SO 1.2 “Improving the capacity for nature protection, sustainable use and management of common natural resources through cooperation initiatives in the cross-border area”. In order to measure the impact of the programme efforts, RI 1.2 “Increased capacity level for nature protection, sustainable use and management of common natural resources” was established.

It becomes evident that RI 1.2 still needs to deliver the target result, as it achieved 47.1% of the total end goal. Nonetheless, in view of the projects and their progression, it can be concluded that by the time of the final program report, the target will be met, and even exceeded. Furthermore, the projects encompass a distinct type of measures within the projects, which further enhance the SO, including support for cross-border spatial planning efforts, organisation of specialized events and training sessions and development of strategic and methodological documents.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 1.2 collectively contribute to enhancements in the level of capacity for nature protection, sustainable use and management of common natural resources in the cross-border area.

(SO 2.1) What change can be observed in increasing the touristic attractiveness of the cross-border area through better utilisation of natural, cultural and historical heritage and related infrastructure?

The program emphasizes the importance of leveraging the region's natural, cultural, and historical heritage, along with related infrastructure, to enhance tourism attractiveness. Developing sustainable tourism is crucial for the CBC region, serving as a catalyst for socio-economic growth. Therefore, the programme addressed this need with SO 2.1 “Increasing the touristic attractiveness of the cross-border area through better utilisation of natural, cultural and historical heritage and related infrastructure”. To measure the effectiveness of measures, RI 2.1 “Increased nights spent in the cross-border area” is used.

Out of the 6 projects implemented in the first call, the indicator has achieved 133.5% increase, accounting for 23.1% of the total projects implemented. This is also confirmed by NSI and Eurostat data (table 7). The remaining 20 projects from the second call can only increase the indicator’s value. Moreover, the projects encompass several distinct types of measures, which further enhance the SO, including investment measures, involving



reconstruction of historical sites and conservation of maritime natural resources and measures for better accessibility to tourist destinations in the region.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 2.1 collectively contribute to increase in the tourism attractiveness.

(SO 2.2) What change can be observed in the level of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area?

The program places a strong emphasis on the continuous pursuit of new sources of comparative advantages for tourism destinations. These comparative advantages, rooted in the region's tourism resources and complemented by effective destination management and marketing strategies, have the potential to transform into compelling tourism attractions. In doing so, they become competitive advantages that can sustain long-term growth and development for the tourism destination, ultimately enhancing its market position. To address this need, the programme identified SO 2.2 “Increasing the cross-border tourism potential by developing common destinations”, which effectiveness is measured with RI 2.2. “Increased level of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area”.

Out of the 10 projects implemented in the first call, the indicator has achieved 34% of its target value. Nonetheless, after closer observation (presented further in this report) of the individual projects and output indicators, the remaining 5 projects from the second call are expected achieve and even exceed the target. Moreover, the projects encompass several distinct types of measures, which further enhance the SO, including Implementation of cross-border sustainable tourism strategies and action plans, enhancement of local tourism destinations inspired by the region's rich natural, historical, and cultural heritage and development of new touristic products and services.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 2.2 collectively contribute to enhancements in the level of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area.

(SO 2.3) What change can be observed in the level of capacity, awareness and initiatives for sustainable tourism development in the cross-border area?

The program recognizes the paramount importance of fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among host communities regarding sustainable tourism in the border region. This represents a significant challenge for tourism managers and planners, as neither of these elements can be easily instilled in the short term. In pursuit of achieving these objectives, the programme identified SO 2.3 “Increasing networking for development of sustainable tourism through cross-border cooperation initiatives”, which effectiveness is measured with RI 2.3 “Increased level of awareness about sustainable tourism development in the cross-border area”.

Out of the 10 projects implemented in the first call, the indicator has achieved 95.7% of its target value. The remaining 16 projects from the second call are expected to fully achieve, and even expected to exceed, the RIs target. Next to that, the projects encompass several distinct types of measures, which further enhance the SO, including successfully organized events, training courses, and networking opportunities; substantial research has been conducted and strategic documents prepared for both domestic and international demand for cross-border tourism experiences; and commitment to promoting and preserving the shared traditions of the borderland areas is addressed.

Based on the statistical analysis and the evident correlation between the identified regional needs and measures taken to address them, the activities under SO 2.3 collectively contribute to enhancements in the level of capacity, awareness and initiatives for sustainable tourism development in the cross-border area.

With the present analysis of programme RIs and given answers to the evaluation questions, it can be concluded that the three IPA CBC 2014-2020 programmes, managed by the Republic of Bulgaria have made significant contributions towards yielding positive outcomes. These achievements highlight the effectiveness of the collaborative efforts between the two nations, fostering increased cooperation among local stakeholders and a growing enthusiasm for the execution of shared cross-border initiatives aimed at promoting the sustainable development of bordering regions. Some of the major accomplishments include:

- ➔ **Increase in governance capacity** by development of strategic and methodological documents, implementation of training programmes and networking events.
- ➔ **Implementation of strategies for environmental protection and preservation** through numerous investment activities (e.g., implementation of flood and fire protection measures for early disaster warning, purchase of safety equipment for firefighters, purchase of equipment for cleaning of river basins, etc.), as well as soft measure actives related to rising awareness about strengthening sustainable environmental practices. An example of successful implementation of those strategies is project CB006.2.12.062 “Joint actions for prevention and reduction of the consequences of disasters in the municipalities of Sandanski and Radovish”.

Figure 1 Case Study - Project CB006.2.12.062

Project CB006.2.12.062 “Joint actions for prevention and reduction of the consequences of disasters in the municipalities of Sandanski and Radovich” was undertaken with the aim of enhancing local sustainable environmental management to mitigate the impact of cross-border natural and man-made disasters in the Municipality of Sandanski and the South-eastern planning region. The project's **impact** has been remarkable, particularly in bolstering the region's resilience to flooding through measures such as riverbed restoration, flood defence construction, and green infrastructure development. By fostering resilience and implementing innovative initiatives, the project has significantly reduced the vulnerability to climate change-related challenges, leading to a more secure and sustainable future for the cross-border region of Bulgaria and Macedonia.

In terms of **innovation**, the project has introduced a comprehensive information campaign, climate change awareness workshops, and infrastructure activities, demonstrating a forward-thinking approach to addressing climate change consequences. Furthermore, the project has benefited from a **strong partnership**, with positive feedback from partners regarding effective leadership and the presence of knowledgeable experts, solidifying their collaboration throughout the project's duration.

- **Strengthened potential of the tourism development** through restoration efforts for heritage buildings and maintenance of traditional landscapes, improved accessibility to tourist sites within the cross-border region and implementation of effective visitor management plans to safeguard the natural and cultural resources of the region.
- **Increased attractiveness of the touristic area** through a variety of marketing campaigns, cultural events and other entertainment focused practices. The success of the tourism development efforts can be further confirmed by NSI data related to the **increase in spent nights in the regions**, which is also one of the indicators within the programme for effective implementation of strategies.

Table 7 Increase in nights spent in CBC regions

% Increase/ decrease in realised nights spent 2014 vs 2022							
Republic of Bulgaria		Republic of North Macedonia		Republic of Serbia		Türkiye	
Region	%	Region	%	Region	%	Region	%
Vidin	44,1	Nort-East	83,6	Borski	51,4	Edirne	N/A
Vratsa	36,1	East	-3,3	Zajcarski	200,5	Kirklareli	N/A
Montana	36,6	South-East	16,1	Pirotski	145,7		
Pernik	18,8			Nisavski	119,1		
Sofia	17,4			Toplicki	71,9		
Kyustendil	22,9			Jablanicki	105,5		
Blagoevgrad	19,3			Pcinjski	129,9		
Bourgaz	11,7						
Yambol	-50,0						
Haskovo	75,2						

- ➔ **Development of entrepreneurial culture among young adults** through organisation of networking events, counselling sessions and other relevant activities.
- ➔ **Enhanced economic development of the CBC regions and increased competitiveness of local businesses** by establishing information systems, supporting the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and encouraging new networking opportunities across borders.
- ➔ **Promoting commitment to preservation of the shared traditions of the borderland areas** through encouraging and involving the target audiences in events focused on common values across borders.

Undoubtedly, a clear and meaningful connection exists between the challenges identified within the cross-border region, as delineated by the programmes, the authorized activities, and measures designed to address these challenges, and the core essence of the project concepts.

Beyond the statistical data and project outcomes, the program has played a pivotal role in promoting broader positive impacts, such as breaking down communication barriers between Bulgaria and its IPA beneficiary countries and fostering neighbourly relations. The survey results underscore that beneficiaries have identified several motivating factors for their participation in the CBC programs. Notably, there is a strong interest in knowledge exchange and the opportunities presented for establishing and maintaining valuable relationships.

Table 8 Summarised Survey Results for Q. "To what extent did the following opportunities motivate your organisation to participate in the project?"

"To what extent did the following opportunities motivate your organisation to participate in the project?"	BG – MK		BG – RS		BG - TR	
	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)
<i>Access to public funding</i>	Highly motivated	4.75	Somewhat motivated	4.28	Somewhat motivated	4.12
<i>Access to knowledge/ facilities in other countries</i>	Somewhat motivated	4.33	Somewhat motivated	4.28	Somewhat motivated	4.44
<i>Develop new knowledge in the subject area</i>	Highly motivated	4.58	Somewhat motivated	4.47	Somewhat motivated	4.44
<i>Strengthen existing relationships with organisations in other countries</i>	Highly motivated	4.75	Highly motivated	4.53	Highly motivated	4.80
<i>Build relationships with organisations in other countries</i>	Highly motivated	4.71	Highly motivated	4.56	Highly motivated	4.68
<i>Build or enhance engagement with organisations (e.g. third parties, end users, etc.) at can benefit from the project results</i>	Highly motivated	4.71	Somewhat motivated	4.47	Highly motivated	4.72
<i>Become more internationally oriented</i>	Somewhat motivated	4.21	Somewhat motivated	4.33	Highly motivated	4.68
<i>Build capacity to access EU funding in the future</i>	Highly motivated	4.63	Somewhat motivated	4.39	Somewhat motivated	4.48
<i>Learn About Good practices in other countries</i>	Highly motivated	4.54	Highly motivated	4.61	Highly motivated	4.72

*The survey results are interpreted by looking at the mean (average) of the responses on a scale of 1 (Not motivated at all) to 5 (Highly motivated).

Nonetheless, for this data to be meaningful, the evaluation team examined the impacts and changes that beneficiary experienced after their involvement in the programme. From this analysis it can be seen that their expectations and motivations can be positively confirmed after implementing their projects.

Table 9 Summarised Survey Results for Q. "What are the impacts/ expected impacts on your organisation from participating in the specific cross-border project (i.e. how will your organisation benefit from the exploitable outcomes)?"

"What are the impacts/ expected impacts on your organisation from participating in the specific cross-border project (i.e. how will your organisation benefit from the exploitable outcomes)?"	BG – MK		BG – RS		BG - TR	
	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)
<i>Additional income</i>	Low impact	3.04	Low impact	3.28	Medium impact	3.64
<i>Better access to external investment</i>	Medium impact	3.50	Low impact	3.11	Medium impact	3.96
<i>Reduced operating costs</i>	Medium impact	3.58	Low impact	3.08	Low impact	3.48
<i>Increased EU market share</i>	Low impact	2.96	Low impact	2.53	Medium impact	3.60
<i>Improved competences and skills</i>	High impact	4.63	High impact	4.53	Medium impact	4.44
<i>Improved access to networks</i>	Medium impact	4.33	Medium impact	3.94	Medium impact	4.32

<i>Higher profile in the EU community</i>	High impact	4.50	Medium impact	3.97	Medium impact	4.12
<i>Improved performance of your organisation</i>	Medium impact	4.25	Medium impact	4.06	Medium impact	4.24
<i>Better evidence to make policy/strategy decisions</i>	Medium impact	3.71	Medium impact	3.56	Medium impact	4.12
<i>Higher level of influence on third parties (e.g. policy makers, industry, NGOs)</i>	Low impact	3.29	Low impact	3.19	Medium impact	3.84
<i>Increased interest in seeking partnerships with organisations in other EU countries</i>	Medium impact	4.21	Medium impact	4.19	Medium impact	4.40
<i>Increased interest in collaborating with organisations outside EU</i>	Medium impact	3.71	Medium impact	3.67	Medium impact	4.12

*The survey results are interpreted by looking at the mean (average) of the responses on a scale of 1 (No impact) to 5 (High impact).

Survey results revealed that the most significant benefits of the program are related to: improved performance, competences and skills of the participating organisations, better access to networks within the European Union, as well as higher profile in the EU community.

In line with that statement, during the on-site focus groups many beneficiaries shared their positive attitude towards the benefits of the programmes related to networking and building of relationships across borders.

Most important take-out of the project is cooperation and network that the organisations build across borders.

Statement from Focus Group in Nis, Serbia (23.08.2023)

Furthermore, beneficiaries identified several beneficial factors of the CBC programmes in comparison to national programmes. Amongst those, it is worth noting that beneficiaries value the higher-quality of results, the opportunities presented by the programme and the more ambitious objectives they can set for themselves, as among the main reasons for choosing Interreg IPA programmes over national programmes.

Table 10 Summarised Survey Results for Q. “To what extent the opportunity to participate in a cross-border project was better than participating in a similar project with only national partners in your country?”

“To what extent the opportunity to participate in a cross-border project was better than participating in a similar project with only national partners in your country?”	BG – MK		BG – RS		BG - TR	
	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)
<i>The cross-border project provided access to higher-quality additional expertise and/or facilities than would have been possible with a national project</i>	Agree	4.13	Agree	3.83	Agree	4.16

<i>The cross-border project allowed us to participate in a type of project that would be very difficult or impossible, to be funded in your country</i>	Agree	3.83	Agree	4.08	Agree	4.12
<i>The cross-border project produced higher quality results</i>	Agree	4.17	Agree	4.14	Agree	4.28
<i>The cross-border project delivered the results in less time than would have been the case in a national project</i>	Agree	3.83	Agree	3.56	Agree	3.92
<i>The cross-border project required less administrative effort to manage than would have been the case with a national project</i>	Neutral	2.71	Neutral	2.33	Neutral	3.24
<i>The cross-border project pursued objectives that were more ambitious</i>	Agree	4.00	Agree	3.78	Agree	4.16

*The survey results are interpreted by looking at the mean (average) of the responses on a scale of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

Another critical thematic aspect that should be considered in terms of the realized changes and overall impact of the three programs on the cross-border region is sustainability. Sustainability is closely linked to RI as it is the primary factor upon which long-term impact relies.

Conclusions regarding the focus on sustainability in the programs can be deduced from two primary sources:

- The stipulations outlined in the application guidelines
- Input from the focus groups.

Upon careful examination of the application guidelines for the three programs, it is evident that there is insufficient emphasis on sustainability, both in terms of the requirements for the Beneficiaries and the evaluation criteria. This could be considered a notable weakness. Establishing more explicit demands concerning the demonstration of project sustainability, along with specific methodologies and strategies for the continuation of projects beyond their financial and physical implementation, would encourage applicants to formulate proposals geared toward long-term impact rather than mere fund absorption through the execution of targeted activities. By implementing more rigorous and unambiguous sustainability requirements that participants must substantiate in their project proposals, along with a more thorough assessment of sustainability in the criteria, a framework can be established for the selection of higher-quality projects aimed at fostering lasting effects.

During the focus group discussions on all three programs, we delved into the complete life cycle of each project, consistently highlighting the importance of sustainability at its culmination. The feedback received corroborated the findings derived from the analysis of the application guidelines and brought to light a significant challenge that necessitates attention. Several distinct conclusions can be drawn:

In terms of the types of interventions—soft measures or investment measures:

- Investment measures generally exhibit better sustainability due to their characteristic allocation of financial resources toward the construction, reconstruction, or provision of

tangible assets. However, beneficiaries often encounter challenges in securing funding for subsequent maintenance and operations.

- Soft measures contribute to capacity building across various domains through the implementation of training programs, policy development, and other activities. Nevertheless, there is a lack of clear evidence demonstrating how the impact of these training initiatives on specific individuals or organisations can be sustained over time, which is crucial for ensuring long-term project sustainability and fostering a robust cross-border impact. Moreover, when developing strategies, manuals, catalogues, and promotional events, beneficiaries face significant difficulties in generating substantial public engagement post-project due to limited financial resources, resulting in compromised sustainability.

ESTIMATING IMPACTS: TO WHAT EXTENT CAN THE OBSERVED CHANGES BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME?

To assess the extent of the program's contribution to achieving the specific objective and provide answers to the evaluation questions related to EP “Estimating impacts” (ToR, ch. 4.2 “Specific work”), the Consultant conducted an examination encompassing changes directly linked to programme implementation and overall effectiveness in realizing desired results. This was done on three levels – assessment of the relevance of specific objectives, assessment of the programmes’ intervention fields and analysing the instrument to measure impact – the output indicators (OIs).

Interreg - IPA Cross-border Programme Bulgaria – North Macedonia 2014-2020

Prior to analysing the programme impacts and the changes that can be attributed to the programme directly, one must also view the programme’s main objective. For the Interreg programme Bulgaria – the former Yugoslav Republic Macedonia Interreg - IPA Cross-border Programme 2014-2020, managed by the republic of Bulgaria, the main programme objective is:

to intensify cross-border cooperation between the people and institutions of the region in order to jointly address common challenges and exploit untapped potentials.

The extensive relevance of SOs to PAs, as evidenced in the accompanying table, reinforces the program's commitment to aligning its efforts with the strategic objectives.

Table 11 BG-MK Relevance of SOs to programme (Survey results)

Specific Objective	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)
SO 1.1: Environmental protection and sustainable use of the common natural resources of the CBC area	Relevant	4.35

SO 1.2: Prevention and mitigation of consequences of natural and man caused disasters of cross-border dimension and impact	Relevant	4.40
SO 2.1: Enhancing the tourism potential of the region through cooperation initiatives in better preservation and sustainable utilisation of natural and cultural heritage	Very relevant	4.60
SO 2.2: Raising the competitiveness of the CBC region's tourism offer	Very relevant	4.57
SO 2.3: Promoting cooperation among regional actors in the area of sustainable tourism	Relevant	4.47
SO 3.1: Improving the competitiveness of regional businesses	Relevant	4.38

Source: Survey among Managing Bodies

Moreover, the **analysis of the preferred intervention fields (IF)** in terms of the number of projects and fund allocation reveals several noteworthy trends. Cultural and heritage asset protection and development have garnered the highest level of attention in the region, constituting 20% of projects, while environmental protection and climate-related risk prevention rank second with 19% of projects. Whereas, for the rest of the thematic intervention fields, a rather balanced approach can be observed in terms of number of projects and funding.

Table 12 BG-MK. Thematic intervention fields

Intervention field	Projects (number)	Budget (%)
<u>094</u> Protection, development and promotion of public cultural and heritage assets	15	25%
<u>085</u> Protection and enhancement of biodiversity, nature protection and green infrastructure	14	17%
<u>087</u> Adaptation to climate change measures and prevention and management of climate related risks e.g. erosion, fires, flooding, storms and drought, including awareness raising, civil protection and disaster management systems and infrastructures	8	25%
<u>092</u> Protection, development and promotion of public tourism assets	8	12%
<u>095</u> Development and promotion of public cultural and heritage services	5	6%
<u>066</u> Advanced support services for SMEs and groups of SMEs (including management, marketing and design services)	4	2%
<u>067</u> SME business development, support to entrepreneurship and incubation (including support to spin offs and spin outs)	4	2%
<u>104</u> Self-employment, entrepreneurship and business creation including innovative micro, small and medium sized enterprises	4	2%
<u>063</u> Cluster support and business networks primarily benefiting SMEs	3	1%
<u>103</u> Sustainable integration into the labour market of young people, in particular those not in employment, education or training, including young people at risk of social exclusion and young people from marginalised communities, including through the implementation of the Youth Guarantee	3	2%
<u>075</u> Development and promotion of tourism services in or for SMEs	2	3%
<u>109</u> Active inclusion, including with a view to promoting equal opportunities and active participation, and improving employability	2	1%

064 Research and innovation processes in SMEs (including voucher schemes, process, design, service and social innovation)	1	1%
073 Support to social enterprises (SMEs)	1	1%

Source: MIS

Notably, there is an overlap in thematic intervention fields, such as 092, 094, and 075, all related to the promotion of the tourism sector. Additionally, the extensive array of intervention fields has led to a dispersion of focus, potentially hindering the program's ability to address the region's needs in a more efficient and concise manner. This dispersion is particularly evident in the limited number of projects dedicated to research and innovation processes, as well as support for SMEs, both of which are vital components of the desired outcomes under PA 3, "Competitiveness." Nonetheless, the overall number of projects distributed across various intervention fields also suggests that the program has indeed maintained a high level of focus on its objectives related to PA 3.

It is essential to consider that more precise and focused intervention fields established by the program have the potential to yield better measurements of impact. This, in turn, would enhance the program's effectiveness in achieving its overarching objectives.

Nonetheless, the statistics directly contribute to the program's key achievements mentioned afore in this report, reinforcing the program's pivotal role in shaping the anticipated effects on the development of the program area. In this light, the program's impact is closely aligned with its overarching objectives, solidifying its positive contributions to the region's development. These combined factors underscore the program's substantial achievements in fulfilling its priority axis objectives, while also highlighting opportunities for refinement and enhancement in select areas.

Furthermore, for each specific objective (SO), a set of OIs is developed to track the programme's progress in achieving its goals. Those **OIs** are directly linked to the projects' implementation results. For interpreting the outcomes of the given data, **performance analysis** was necessitated. Prior the analysis, however, it must be noted that the 2023 annual report is still not available at the time of the evaluation.

Table 13 BG-MK OI progression over time

ID	Target value	Total value /First & Second call/	% of achievement
OI 1.1.1.1 Number of supported investments for improving the environmental conditions in the programme region	15	22	146,7%
OI 1.1.1.2 Number of nature protected areas addressed by supported interventions	5	8	160,0%
OI 1.1.1.3 Number of supported joint mechanisms for environmental protection, promotion of biodiversity and sustainable use of natural resources	8	12	150,0%
OI 1.1.1.4 Number of institutions/organisations involved in environmental related activities	145	187	129,0%

OI 1.1.1.5 Number of participants in environmental related trainings and campaigns	1031	1091	105,8%
OI 1.2.2.1 Supported investments for improving disaster management and risk prevention	7	10	142,9%
OI 1.2.2.2 Supported investments for adaptation and mitigation of climate change consequences	7	11	157,1%
OI 1.2.2.3 Supported joint mechanisms for disaster management and risk prevention and for promotion of climate change awareness	3	7	233,3%
OI 1.2.2.4 Number of institutions/organisations involved in initiatives related to risk prevention and management	17	72	423,5%
OI 1.2.2.5 Number of participants in trainings and campaigns in the field of risk prevention, (including marginalized communities and other vulnerable groups)	300	742	247,3%
OI 1.2.2.6 Population benefiting from flood protection measures	350 000	499 231	142,6%
OI 1.2.2.7 Population benefiting from forest fire protection measures	400 000	901 168	225,3%
OI 2.1.1.1. Number of cultural and historical touristic sites reconstructed / restored / covered by conservation and protection actions	16	16	100,0%
OI 2.1.1.2 Length of new or reconstructed or upgraded access roads to natural, cultural and historic tourism sites, cycling routes and walking paths	5	12,42	248,4%
OI 2.1.1.3 Number of newly built or reconstructed or upgraded tourist related facilities and attractions	16	17	106,3%
OI 2.1.1.4 Number of created/reconstructed facilities for disabled people for access to or in the supported	5	5	100,0%
OI 2.2.1.1 Number of joint touristic products, services, brands, thematic routes	20	22	110,0%
OI 2.2.1.2 Number of actions, tools and initiatives developed and/or implemented for promotion of sustainable tourism potential of the eligible border area	19	23	121,1%
OI 2.2.1.3 Number of participants in joint training and qualification initiatives in the field of sustainable tourism	256	256	100,0%
OI 2.3.1.1 Number of cross-border networks established or strengthened in the field of sustainable tourism	5	7	140,0%
OI 2.3.1.2 Number of cultural events held for promoting the region's cultural identity	15	19	126,7%
OI 2.3.1.3 Number of participants in youth initiatives	150	240	160,0%
OI 3.1.1.1 Supported joint start-up and self- employment initiatives	11	12	109,1%
OI 3.1.1.2 Number of participants (split into men and women) in supported training and qualification initiatives	1087	1241	114,2%
OI 3.1.1.3 Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support	151	153	101,3%
OI 3.1.2.1 Supported initiatives for economic development and investment promotion	20	24	120,0%
OI 3.1.2.2 Number of cooperation networks	18	19	105,6%

Source: Annual reports

Following the data provided in table 10 and observation of individual projects, a closer look is taken into each SO for the IPA CBC Bulgaria – Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020 programme and its respective OIs to find answers to the evaluation questions related to the second evaluation principle “Estimating impacts” (listed in ToR, ch. 4.2 “Specific work”).

(SO 1.1) To what extent has the Programme contributed to the environmental protection and sustainable use of the common natural resources of the cross-border area?

During the first call for proposals, all projects falling under SO 1.1 have successfully achieved their ER. A significant number of projects have achieved higher AR than the target in OI 1.1.1.4 and OI 1.1.1.5. This highlights a positive influence on environmental protection through soft measures. However, there is a shortage of projects addressing OI 1.1.1.2. Nonetheless, within the second call for proposals, there is no overachievement of indicators, and there is a project that addresses OI 1.1.1.2, leading to its achievement of 160%.

Overall, the program has ensured the implementation of the specific objective to a greater extent already with the projects under the first call, which is also the reason why only 2 projects were financed in the second call. Locating a larger resource in the specific target was not necessary.

Another critical set of measurements to consider are the final indicators of the OIs, as they vividly illustrate the degree to which the program, and specifically the SO, has contributed to enhancing the cross-border region's capacity for environmental protection and sustainable use of common natural resources. Evidently, all of the results have surpassed the anticipated values over 100%. This underscores the necessity of establishing more ambitious targets for the upcoming periods.

The program has undeniably made significant contributions to the environmental protection and sustainable use of common natural resources within the cross-border area. The desired changes directly linked to SO 1.1 have not only met but exceeded expectations, resulting in a positive program outcome.

(SO 1.2) To what extent has the Programme contributed to the improvement of the local capacities in terms of the prevention and mitigation of consequences of natural and man-caused disasters of cross-border dimension and impact?

During the first call for proposals, all projects falling under SO 1.2 have successfully achieved their ER. There is a higher AR than the target in OI 1.2.2.2 and OI 1.2.2.3. This highlights a positive influence on the prevention and mitigation of consequences of natural and man-caused disasters of cross-border dimension and impact through investment measures. However, there is a shortage of projects addressing OI 1.2.2.7, which is later addressed with the second call. A significant difference between ER and AR can be found in OI 1.2.2.4 and OI 1.2.2.5 for projects under the second call for proposals, which are indicators related to population. This can be explained with the presence of a set of variables, such as immigration, fertility rates, etc., that are not a direct effect of the projects.

A set of measurements to consider are the final indicators of the OIs, as they vividly illustrate the degree to which the program, and specifically the SO, has contributed to the

improvement of the local capacities in terms of the prevention and mitigation of consequences of natural and man-caused disasters of cross-border dimension and impact. Evidently, all of the results have surpassed the anticipated values over 100% and some even reaching 423.5% (OI 1.2.2.4). This underscores the necessity of establishing more ambitious targets for the upcoming periods.

In regard to OI 1.2.2.6 and OI 1.2.2.7, which are indicators addressing population benefiting from the measures, one can conclude that the programme has had a larger impact than the anticipated. Even though, this conclusion must be taken critically as other factors such as population growth, fertility rates, etc., are in place, the high achievement % direct to positive impact on the regional population.

In conclusion, the program has undeniably made significant contributions to the improvement of the local capacities in terms of the prevention and mitigation of consequences of natural and man-caused disasters. The desired changes directly linked to SO 1.2 have not only met but exceeded expectations, resulting in a positive program outcome.

(SO 2.1) To what extent has the Programme contributed to the enhancement of the tourism potential of the region through cooperation initiatives in better preservation and sustainable utilization of natural and cultural heritage?

In the first call for proposals, nearly all projects falling under SO 2.1 successfully reached their intended targets. There were no significant instances of underachievement or overachievement, except two projects who didn't manage to reach their targets under OI 2.1.1.3 of indicators. This indicates that the majority of beneficiaries demonstrated a clear and comprehensive understanding of the requirements and had diligently prepared their projects.

The trend of successfully achieved projects persists in those executed under the second call for proposals, which indicates that the program has effectively maximized its available financial resources, resulting in a positive impact on increasing the cross-border tourism potential.

One indicator stands out with 248.4% of achievement – OI 2.1.1.2, which underlines the opportunity for more precise planning of indicators on both programme and project level in the future.

Upon a comprehensive review of the program's performance against its output indicators, it becomes evident that the programme has achieved positive regional impact. This underscores the program's effectiveness in enhancing the region's tourism assets and accessibility, contributing positively to local communities and the visitor experience.

(SO 2.2) To what extent has the Programme contributed to raising the competitiveness of the cross-border region's tourism offer?

In the first call for proposals, all projects falling under SO 2.2 successfully reached their intended targets. There were no significant instances of underachievement or overachievement, except one project, which slightly overreached its targets under OI 2.2.1.3 of indicators. This indicates that the majority of beneficiaries demonstrated a clear and comprehensive understanding of the requirements and had diligently prepared their projects.

As the second call was targeted to the unachieved indicators, only 1 project from the reserve list under OI 2.2.1 has been contracted.

There is no significant overreach in the OIs achievement under SO 2.2, which underlines the well-planned indicators on programme level. Upon a comprehensive review of the program's performance against its output indicators, it becomes evident that the programme has achieved positive regional impact. This underscores the program's effectiveness in raising the competitiveness of the cross-border region's tourism offer.

(SO 2.3) To what extent has the Programme contributed to promoting cooperation among regional actors in the area of sustainable tourism?

In the first call for proposals, all projects falling under SO 2.3 successfully reached their intended targets. There were no significant instances of underachievement or overachievement. This indicates that the majority of beneficiaries demonstrated a clear and comprehensive understanding of the requirements and had diligently prepared their projects. However, those projects didn't focus OI 2.3.1.3.

The trend of successfully achieved projects persists in those executed under the second call for proposals. Within this call OI 2.3.1.3 received attention.

The available data underscore that the program has effectively maximized its available financial resources, resulting in a positive impact on increasing the cross-border tourism potential.

The indicators have achieved 126.7% (OI 2.3.1.2) at the lowest and 160% (OI 2.3.1.3) at the highest, which presents an opportunity for more optimistic planning of indicators on programme level for the upcoming periods.

Upon a comprehensive review of the program's performance against its output indicators, it becomes evident that the programme has achieved positive regional impact. This underscores the program's effectiveness in promoting cooperation among regional actors.

(SO 3.1) To what extent has the Programme contributed to improvement of the regional businesses competitiveness?

In a comprehensive review of all projects under the first call, it is evident that each of them has successfully achieved their expected output indicators. This collective accomplishment underscores the effectiveness of the project planning and execution processes, as well as the dedication and competence of the project teams.

While the majority of projects met their output indicators without significant under or overachievement, it is noteworthy that a few projects exceeded expectations in at least one of their Output Indicators (OIs). This overachievement highlights their ability to not just meet but surpass their intended goals, resulting in additional positive outcomes. Upon thorough evaluation, during the second call for proposals, it becomes evident that the majority of projects have successfully reached their expected output indicators. One project fell short of the targeted value in OI 3.1.2.1. However, it's essential to recognize that this project was still deemed as "achieved" by the program. This indicates that, despite not reaching the initial

target, the project's outcomes were considered satisfactory and aligned with the broader goals of the program.

The overall success of projects in attaining their expected output indicators is a testament to the program's efficacy and the commitment of its stakeholders. The instances of overachievement in some projects showcase the potential for projects to excel and go above and beyond their original objectives, leading to even greater positive impacts on the region.

Following a comprehensive review of the program's performance against its output indicators, it is clear that the achievements have met expectations without a significant overachievement. This provides an insight about the realistic planning of indicators on programme level. It also underscores the program's effectiveness in contributing to the improvement of the regional businesses competitiveness.

With the present analysis of the projects and OIs under IPA CBC Bulgaria – Republic of North Macedonia 2014-2020 programme, managed by the republic of Bulgaria, as well as the given answers to the evaluation questions, it can be concluded that the programme has achieved positive contribution towards achieving its objectives and addressing the regional needs.

Furthermore, with the above information in mind, several overall observations can be made.

The attainment of the majority OIs serves as a clear indication of the successful execution of projects.

The notable disparity between the Achieved Result and the Target value suggests an opportunity for more precise planning in the future, potentially warranting higher target values. This is especially the case with OIs, which have achieved over 50% than their targets - OI 1.1.1.2, OI 1.1.1.3, OI 1.2.2.1, OI 1.2.2.4, OI 1.2.2.5, OI 2.1.1.2 and OI 2.1.1.2.

Simultaneously, a substantial portion of the target values for the remaining indicators has been achieved at the border, which poses a certain level of risk.

Nonetheless, in the case of PA 3. “Competitiveness” all OIs are rather balanced with slight positive difference between the target value and achieved value, which speaks for realistic planning of indicators from both programme and beneficiaries. Exemplary for precise planning of indicators and effective execution of activities is project CB006.2.31.040 Social Enterprise Ecosystem Development.

Figure 2 Case Study. CB006.2.31.040 Social Enterprise Ecosystem Development

Project **CB006.2.31.040, "Social Enterprise Ecosystem Development,"** managed by the Foundation for Development of Small and Medium Enterprises and Business Incubator, aimed to stimulate social entrepreneurship capacity among youths and NGOs and encourage the development of innovative solutions for the region's societal challenges. The project's effectiveness was exemplary, as all activities precisely met their target values.

The **impact** of this initiative has been substantial, addressing challenges faced by unemployed youth and non-profit organisations grappling with high youth unemployment and unsustainable funding methods. The project empowered motivated young individuals and NGOs to **develop sustainable solutions**, effectively addressing both unemployment and the limited access to social services in depopulating local communities. Additionally, it introduced **innovative practices by invigorating social entrepreneurship skills among youth and NGOs and fostering an ecosystem for solutions to address the region's unique social issues**. The project's success is also attributed to **strong partnership and effective leadership**, resulting in a robust and sustainable initiative that enhances social entrepreneurship skills and encourages innovative solutions to address local societal challenges. The establishment of Social Entrepreneurship Hubs and e-learning content further ensures the ongoing growth and impact of social entrepreneurship in the region.

Furthermore, in the first call for proposals, several indicators had already met their respective targets (OI 1.1.1.3, OI 1.1.1.4, OI 1.1.1.5, OI 2.2.1.1, OI 2.2.1.3, OI 3.1.1.1, OI 3.1.1.3). Those under PA 1, "Environment," and PA 3, "Competitiveness," experienced slight increases during the second call, whereas those under Priority Axis 2, "Tourism," remained unchanged. This information underscores a positive note regarding the reallocation of funds from one SO to another, particularly for those that struggled to advance their results in the first call.

On an individual project level, the indicators are well-structured, with the Expected Result often falling below the Achieved Result. This observation implies that program beneficiaries tend to intentionally underestimate the indicator values during project planning, potentially as a form of "insurance" to ensure their successful attainment during project implementation.

Overall, the program has significantly surpassed expected outcomes in most areas, demonstrating substantial contributions to the development of the region for each PA. The desired changes linked to the SOs have not only met but exceeded expectations, culminating in a positive program outcome.

Bulgaria – Serbia Interreg - IPA Cross-border Programme 2014-2020

Prior to analysing the programme impacts and the changes that can be attributed to the programme directly, one must also view the programme's main objective. For the Interreg

programme Bulgaria – Serbia Interreg - IPA Cross-border Programme 2014-2020, managed by the republic of Bulgaria, the main programme objective is:

“ to stimulate the balanced and sustainable development of the Bulgaria - Serbia border region integrated in the European space – achieved through smart economic growth, environmental change adaptation and learning culture enhancement. ”

The extensive relevance of SOs to PAs, as evidenced in the accompanying table, reinforces the program's commitment to aligning its efforts with the strategic objectives.

Table 14 BG-RS Relevance of SOs to programme (Survey results)

Specific Objective	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)
SO 1.1: Tourist attractiveness: Supporting the development of competitive tourist attractions achieved through cooperation, thus contributing to the diversification of tourist product(s) in the cross-border region	Very relevant	4.65
SO 1.2: Cross-border touristic product: Capturing economic benefits from development of natural and cultural heritage in the border area through creating common cross-border touristic destination(s)	Very relevant	4.52
SO 1.3 People-to-people networking: Capitalising the effect of cultural, historical and natural heritage tourism on border communities through common actions	Very relevant	4.60
SO 2.1: Skills & entrepreneurship: Supporting the development of attractive environment for advancement of young people in the border region achieved through cooperation	Relevant	4.4
SO 2.2: People-to-people networking: Promote cooperation initiatives for and with young people, thus enhancing mobility of young people across borders	Very relevant	4.57
SO 3.1: Joint risk management: To prevent and mitigate the consequences of natural and man-made cross-border disasters	Very relevant	4.69
SO 3.2: Nature protection: Promoting and enhancing the utilization of common natural resources, as well as stimulating nature protection in the programme area, through joint initiatives across the border	Relevant	4.32

Source: Survey among managing bodies

Moreover, the **analysis of the preferred intervention fields (IF)** in terms of the number of projects and fund allocation reveals several noteworthy trends. Cultural and heritage asset protection and development have garnered the highest level of attention in the region, constituting 27% of projects, while environmental protection and climate-related risk prevention rank second with 15% of projects.

Table 15 BG-RS. Thematic intervention fields

Intervention field	Projects (number)	Budget (%)
<u>094</u> Protection, development and promotion of public cultural and heritage assets	25	28%
<u>085</u> Protection and enhancement of biodiversity, nature protection and green infrastructure	18	19%
<u>095</u> Development and promotion of public cultural and heritage services	13	7%
<u>087</u> Adaptation to climate change measures and prevention and management of climate related risks e.g. erosion, fires, flooding, storms and drought, including awareness raising, civil protection and disaster management systems and infrastructures	12	19%
<u>109</u> Active inclusion, including with a view to promoting equal opportunities and active participation, and improving employability	12	4%
<u>118</u> Improving the labour market relevance of education and training systems, facilitating the transition from education to work, and strengthening vocational education and training systems and their quality, including through mechanisms for skills anticipation, adaptation of curricula and the establishment and development of work-based learning systems, including dual learning systems and apprenticeship schemes	10	7%
<u>055</u> Other social infrastructure, contributing to regional and local development	8	9%
<u>075</u> Development and promotion of tourism services in or for SMEs	8	7%

Source: MIS

On the other hand, there is an overlap in thematic intervention fields, such as 094 and 075, related to the promotion of the tourism sector. This overlap suggests that more precise and focused intervention fields established by the program can potentially lead to better measurement of impact, further enhancing the program's ability to achieve its overarching objectives.

Nonetheless, the statistics directly contribute to the program's key achievements mentioned earlier, reinforcing the program's pivotal role in shaping the anticipated effects on the development of the program area. In this light, the program's impact is closely aligned with its overarching objectives, solidifying its positive contributions to the region's development. These combined factors underscore the program's substantial achievements in fulfilling its priority axis objectives, while also highlighting opportunities for refinement and enhancement in select areas.

Furthermore, an **assessment of the OIs** was done. The results shown below are based on the 2022 annual report, therefore they are analysed by keeping in mind their possible change after the final projects in 2023 are assessed and the 2023 annual report is compiled.

Table 16 BG-RS OI progression over time

ID	Target value	Total value /First & Second call/	% of achievement (2022)
OI 1.1.1 Total number of reconstructed / restored cultural and historical touristic objects in the eligible border area	15	16	106,67%
OI 1.1.2 Total number of small scale technical infrastructure, encouraging the visits to the tourist attractions	18	20	111,11%
OI 1.1.3 Total number of created/reconstructed facilities for disabled people in the supported touristic sites	7	7	100,00%
OI 1.1.4 Total number of information access facilities created/upgraded	9	10,5	116,67%
OI 1.2.1 Number of sustainable tourism strategies/action plans of common tourist destinations	6	7	116,67%
OI 1.2.2 Total number of newly established touristic products / services	5	12	240,00%
OI 1.2.3 Tools developed and/or implemented for marketing and promoting tourist products in the eligible border area	8	24	300,00%
OI 1.3.1 Public awareness initiatives promoting sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage and resources	20	28	140,00%
OI 1.3.2 Capacity building initiatives for capitalisation of the common touristic product/services	20	30	150,00%
OI 1.3.3 Total number of joint events aimed at promotion and cultivation of the common traditions of the borderland areas	15	27	180,00%

OI 2.1.1 Total number of supported youth-related small-scale infrastructure, training and information facilities	17	19	111,76%
OI 2.1.2 Total number of young people involved in the supported youth entrepreneurship schemes and initiatives	573	573	100,00%
OI 2.2.1 Total number of youth networking initiatives supported by the Programme	15	31	206,67%

OI 3.1.1 Total number of joint activities aimed at establishing joint early warning and disaster management systems	6	6	100,00%
OI 3.1.2 Purchased specialised equipment related to disaster management	15	15	100,00%
OI 3.1.3 Total number of supported small-scale interventions/investments in green infrastructure for natural water retention.	5	6	120,00%
OI 3.1.4 Total number of people participated in risk prevention and management training activities	600	609	101,50%

OI 3.1.5 Population benefiting from flood protection measures	986 133	945 381	95,87%
OI 3.1.6 Population benefiting from forest fire protection measure	1 586 332	1 6141 49	101,75%
OI 3.2.1 Protected areas/Natura 2000 sites in the border region with EU conform management plans	2	1	50,00%
OI 3.2.2 Total number of joint interventions, addressing the preservation and restoration of CBC ecosystems, as well as preservation and improvement of the quality of soils, air and water	12	13	108,33%
OI 3.2.3 Education and awareness raising joint initiatives, in the field of preservation and protection of natural heritage, biodiversity and landscape	15	19	126,67%
OI 3.2.4 Capacity building initiatives, trainings, exchange of experience and know-how in the field of sustainable use of natural resources	15	19	126,67%

Source: Annual reports

Following the data provided in table 13 and observation of individual projects, a closer look is taken into each SO for the IPA CBC Bulgaria – Serbia 2014-2020 programme and its respective OIs to find answers to the evaluation questions related to the second evaluation principle “Estimating impacts” (listed in ToR, ch. 4.2 “Specific work”).

(SO 1.1) To what extent has the Programme contributed to the increased attractiveness of the region?

After a thorough assessment of the 12 projects falling under the SO 1.1 from the first call for proposals, it is evident that all of these initiatives have successfully achieved their objectives. This assessment also reveals absence of significant overachievement or underachievement concerning their respective output indicators. Such performance underscores the effectiveness of the program's selection process and reflects positively on the program's ability to guide and support these initiatives effectively. It also underscores the comprehensive understanding, high level of commitment and expertise demonstrated by the project beneficiaries.

In the assessment of the 6 projects under the second call several noteworthy observations have emerged. Two of these projects have exhibited underachievement in output indicators, specifically in OI 1.1.2 and OI 1.1.3. This underachievement can be attributed to project planning issues, which impacted their ability to meet the specified objectives effectively. These instances of underachievement underscore the importance of thorough project planning and execution, particularly when it comes to aligning with the program's output indicators. It serves as a reminder of the need for clear and comprehensive project design, as well as careful consideration of the requirements outlined in the call for proposals.

Nonetheless, a set of measurements to consider are the final indicators of the OIs, as they vividly illustrate the degree to which the program has contributed to the increased attractiveness of the region. It is evident that all OIs have achieved and even surpassed their

targets by 6.67% to 16.67%. This in terms, speaks for realistic planning of indicators on programme level.

While some projects from the second call are still pending assessment, the program's results underscore its commitment to driving positive change and development in the eligible border area. Upon a comprehensive review of the program's performance against its output indicators, it becomes evident that the programme has positive contribution to the increased tourism attractiveness of the region.

(SO 1.2) To what extent has the Programme contributed to the increase of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area?

Upon review of the programme's performance against its OIs for SO 1.2, a few observations were made. In the first call for proposals under the specific objective of cross-border touristic products, both of the projects have successfully achieved their objectives. Similarly, in the second call for proposals, where 10 projects were implemented, it is noteworthy that all but one project have already undergone assessment and achieved their objectives. There were no instances of overachievement or underachievement of output indicators, indicating that the projects were well-planned and executed effectively.

Upon a comprehensive review of the output indicators at the program level, it is evident that the achievements have far exceeded the initial expectations, especially OI 1.2.2 (240%) and OI 1.2.3 (300%). Such high percentages of achievement reflect the need to continuously assess the programme interventions for a more effective regional development approach and fund absorption.

Nonetheless, the comprehensive review of the program's performance against its output indicators, it becomes evident that the programme has had a highly positive contribution to the increase of joint and integrated approaches to sustainable tourism development in the border area.

(SO 1.3) To what extent has the Programme contributed to the level of community involvement and awareness about sustainable use of cross-border tourist resources?

Even though information on some of the projects is not available at the time of the evaluation, the majority of projects under SO 1.3, have succeeded in achieving their respective output indicators, showcasing the effectiveness of the program's design and implementation. These outcomes reflect a well-prepared pool of beneficiaries who have taken the program's objectives seriously and executed their projects with diligence.

One project, however, did not manage to fully achieve its target under OI 1.3.3. It's essential to understand the factors that led to this outcome and consider adjustments or support mechanisms that can help similar projects achieve their objectives in the future.

On the other hand, following a comprehensive review of the OIs at the program level, it is evident that all three have exceeded expectations with 40% (OI 1.3.1) up to 80% (OI 1.3.3).

It is important to note that all projects under SO 1.3 were implemented under the second call for proposals. Therefore, a realistic evaluation of the contribution of the programme to the level of community involvement and awareness about sustainable use of cross-border

tourist resources can be done once all project information is available. Nevertheless, with the present result it is evident that this contribution is positive in its essence.

(SO 2.1) To what extent has the Programme contributed to the development of attractive environment for advancement of young people in the border region?

In the evaluation of the program's performance, it is evident that the projects under SO 2.1 have made commendable progress and achieved their intended objectives. In the first call for proposals, all 10 projects related to SO 2.1 demonstrated success in reaching their intended targets. Notably, there was significant overachievement observed in OI 2.1.2, which is linked to the involvement of young people in the supported youth entrepreneurship schemes and initiatives. With the single project, also successfully implemented, in the second call, only OI 2.1.1 was targeted.

At programme level both indicators reached their targets, where OI 2.1.1 reached 111,76% and OI 2.1.2 exactly 100%, which indicates for realistic planning of indicators. As the second call was targeted to the unachieved indicators, only 1 project under OI 2.1.1 has been contracted.

Based on the statistical analysis, it can be concluded that the activities under SO 2.1 collectively contribute to the development of attractive environment for advancement of young people in the border region by creating more youth-oriented infrastructure and support facilities than initially anticipated, as well as fostering youth empowerment and economic participation.

(SO 2.2) To what extent has the Programme contributed to enhancing mobility of young people across borders?

Under SO 2.2, which focuses on people-to-people networking and promoting cooperation initiatives for and with young people to enhance mobility across borders, the program has achieved positive impacts.

The 2 projects under the first call for proposals successfully met their targets exactly for OI 2.2.1. This demonstrates the initial effectiveness of the program's approach in fostering cooperation and mobility among young people in the border region. This trend is also visible in the second call for proposals, even though information for 3 of the projects was not available at the time of evaluation. Furthermore, at programme level, the OI under SO 1.2 (OI 2.2.1), achieved 206,67% of its target as of 2022 data.

The success observed in points to the program's adeptness in mobilizing resources, fostering partnerships, and implementing initiatives that actively engage young people and promote their active participation in cross-border activities. It also indicates a strong commitment to nurturing youth networks and promoting cross-border cooperation, aligning with the broader program objectives. Therefore, it can be concluded that the programme has positively contributed to enhancing mobility of young people across borders.

(SO 3.1) To what extent has the Programme contributed to prevention and mitigation of the consequences of natural and man-made cross-border disasters?

In the evaluation of the program's performance, it is evident that the projects under SO 3.1 have made achieved their intended objectives. In the first call for proposals, all 9 projects related to SO 3.1 demonstrated success in reaching their intended targets. Notably, there was significant overachievement observed in OI 3.1.4, 3.1.5 and 3.16. This reflects the program's effectiveness in engaging the regions communities in joint risk management. The trend of successfully achieved projects persists in the projects implemented under the second call for proposals. Even though information about one project was not available at the time of the evaluation, these facts underscore the beneficiaries' strong preparedness in designing their projects and indicate that the program has effectively maximized its available financial resources, resulting in a positive impact on disaster risk management.

At programme level majority of the OIs have achieved their target values without a significant under or overachievement. The highest achieved indicator is OI 3.1.2 with 120% of achievement, whereas the lowest has yet to be fully achieved with currently 95.87% of achievement (OI 3.1.5). With indicators such as OI 3.1.5 and OI 3.1.6, related to population benefiting from the measures, other factors as population growth, fertility rates, etc., also must be taken into account.

The statistical information provides an insight about the realistic planning of indicators on programme level. It also underscores the program's effectiveness in contributing to prevention and mitigation of the consequences of natural and man-made cross-border disasters.

(SO 3.2) To what extent has the Programme contributed to nature protection and valorisation of common natural resources in the programme area?

In the first call for proposals, all 3 projects related to SO 3.2 were successful in reaching their intended targets. Notably, there was no significant over or underachievement of targets, suggesting the well-planned and executed projects in alignment with the program's requirements. This reflects the program's effectiveness in engaging the regions communities in nature protection. Furthermore, similar is the effect with the projects implemented under the second call, even though one has underachieved its target in OI 3.2.2, which can pose as a lesson learnt for upcoming projects with similar activities.

At programme level, the majority of indicators reached their targets with no significant overachievement, signifying for realistic planning of indicators. On the other hand, OI 3.2.1 has yet to achieve 50% of its target, which is expected to be reached once information about the final project targeting this OI is available.

Based on the statistical analysis, it is evident that the programme has made significant contributions to nature protection and valorisation of common natural resources in the programme area. The positive results suggest commitment and effectiveness of the projects in preserving vital ecological areas, enhancements in the environmental quality of the border region, engagement and education of communities on the significance of environmental conservation, as well as enhancement of the expertise in sustainable resource management.

With the present analysis of the projects and OIs under IPA CBC Bulgaria – Serbia 2014-2020 programme, managed by the republic of Bulgaria, as well as the given answers to the evaluation questions, it can be concluded that the programme has achieved positive contribution towards achieving its objectives and addressing the regional needs.

Furthermore, with the above information in mind, several overall observations can be made.

Firstly, it's evident that a significant majority of Output Indicators (OIs) have exceeded their respective targets. The substantial variance between the Achieved Result and the Target value indicates an opportunity for more precise planning in the future, possibly warranting higher target values. This is particularly notable for OIs that have surpassed their targets by more than 50%, such as OI 1.2.2, OI 1.2.3, OI 1.3.2, OI 1.3.3, and OI 2.2.1. For those OIs that have slightly exceeded their targets, it indicates a presence of realistic planning both at the program and project levels.

Simultaneously, a portion of the target values for the remaining indicators has been achieved at the border, introducing a certain level of risk.

On the other hand, during the second call, observed is a marginal increase in the indicators that had already been achieved in the first call. This implies that instead of allocating resources to different indicators, the resources were continued to be invested in the ones that were already performing well. However, this isn't a major concern because the majority of indicators have exceeded their targets.

Furthermore, at project-specific level, the indicators exhibit a well-defined structure, wherein the Expected Result frequently lags behind the achievement Result. This pattern suggests that program beneficiaries may be adopting a strategic approach by deliberately setting conservative indicator values during the project planning phase. This precautionary strategy could serve as a form of "insurance" to enhance the likelihood of achieving or even surpassing the expected outcomes during the actual project implementation.

Nonetheless, when considering the broader program landscape, it becomes evident that the overall outcomes have exceeded expectations across most facets. This performance underscores the program's profound impact on regional development for each PA. The envisioned changes aligned with the Specific Objectives (SOs) have not only been realized but have, in fact, surpassed initial expectations, culminating in a highly favourable program outcome that significantly benefits the region. A project representing the positive effects on the region and greater focus on the long-term well-being of the population is CB007. 2.32.142 “Preservation and restoration of CBC ecosystems through improvement of the quality of river waters and soils”.

Figure 3 Case Study. CB007. 2.32.142 “Preservation and restoration of CBC ecosystems through improvement of the quality of river waters and soils”

Project **CB007.2.32.142**, managed by Dupnitsa Municipality and Trgovishte Municipality, focuses on preserving and restoring CBC ecosystems while improving the quality of soil, air, and water. **By strengthening the riverbeds in both towns, the project successfully reduces the risk of chemical contamination from petroleum products and oils, benefiting local ecosystems.** Moreover, the initiative has significantly **enhanced collaboration and understanding among partners**, fostering strong ties between the two municipalities and paving the way for future joint efforts.

The project's innovative approach includes **reinforcing the riverbeds of four rivers and expanding local expertise, empowering the community for active participation in environmental preservation.** Through productive partnerships and well-prepared project proposals, they have not only completed the project's objectives effectively but also extended their impact to address real challenges faced by municipalities. The **sustainability period is dedicated to preserving the achieved results**, reflecting their strong commitment to ensuring the lasting positive impact of their initiatives on the CBC ecosystems and the community.

Bulgaria – Türkiye Interreg - IPA Cross-border Programme 2014-2020

Prior to analysing the programme impacts and the changes that can be attributed to the programme directly, one must also view the programme’s main objective. For the Interreg programme Bulgaria – Türkiye Interreg - IPA Cross-border Programme 2014-2020, managed by the republic of Bulgaria, the main programme objective is:

“ to straighten the Bulgaria – Türkiye cross border cooperation capacity in the field of nature protection and sustainable tourism, leading to enhancement of European territorial cohesion. ”

The extensive relevance of SOs to PAs, as evidenced in the accompanying table, reinforces the program's commitment to aligning its efforts with the strategic objectives.

Table 17 BG-TR Relevance of SOs to programme (Survey results)

Specific Objective	Assessment (words)	Assessment (statistical results)
SO 1.1: Preventing and mitigating the consequences of natural and man-made disasters in the cross-border area	Relevant	4.44
SO1.2: Improving the capacity for nature protection, sustainable use and management of natural resources through cooperation initiatives in the cross-border area	Very relevant	4.51

SO 2.1: Increasing the touristic attractiveness of the cross-border are through better utilization of natural, cultural and historical heritage related infrastructure	Very relevant	4.78
SO 2.2: Increasing the cross-border tourism potential by developing common destinations	Relevant	4.78
SO 2.3: Increasing networking for development of sustainable tourism through cross-border cooperation initiatives	Relevant	4.41

Source: Survey among Managing Bodies

Moreover, the **analysis of the preferred intervention fields (IF)** in terms of the number of projects and fund allocation reveals several noteworthy trends. As seen the previous two programmes, cultural and heritage asset protection and development have garnered the highest level of attention in the region, constituting 36% of projects, while environmental protection and climate-related risk prevention rank second with 22% of projects. The least preferred fields are 090 and 079 with less than 3% of all the projects.

Table 18 BG - TR Thematic intervention fields

Intervention field	Projects (number)	Budget (%)
<u>094</u> Protection, development and promotion of public cultural and heritage assets	37	30%
<u>085</u> Protection and enhancement of biodiversity, nature protection and green infrastructure	22	30%
<u>092</u> Protection, development and promotion of public tourism assets	13	12%
<u>087</u> Adaptation to climate change measures and prevention and management of climate related risks e.g. erosion, fires, flooding, storms and drought, including awareness raising, civil protection and disaster management systems and infrastructures	10	16%
<u>095</u> Development and promotion of public cultural and heritage services	10	4%
<u>090</u> Other social infrastructure, contributing to regional and local development	3	5%
<u>079</u> Access to public sector information (including open data e-Tourism)	1	1%

Source: MIS

A general conclusion applies to all three programs, where the majority of resources are channeled into the two prominent Priority Axes (PAs), specifically tourism and the environment. This allocation aligns with the identified highest priorities for the regions, as delineated in the program's strategy and corroborated by feedback from target groups.

Furthermore, akin to other programs, there is an evident overlap in thematic intervention fields (e.g., 092, 094, and 095; 085 and 087), indicating a pronounced focus on just two objectives, as evident from the data presented in the table above. This highlights the importance of heeding the recommendation to concentrate on more precisely defined intervention fields in future programming periods. This strategic adjustment will enable a

more accurate measurement of the program's actual results, fostering greater impact and efficiency in achieving its objectives.

Moreover, an **evaluation of the OIs** was conducted.

Table 19 BG - TR OI progression over time

ID	Target value	Total value /First & Second call/	% of achievement
OI 1.1.1 Number of interventions related to risk prevention and management of natural and man-made hazards and disasters	10	13	130,00%
OI 1.1.2 Number of joint strategies / common guidelines, trainings, public awareness campaigns, exchange of experience for risk prevention and management of natural and man-made hazards and disasters	20	28	140%
OI 1.1.3 Population benefiting from flood protection measures	402 749	530 104	131,62%
OI 1.1.4 Population benefiting from forest fire protection measure	675 662	832 572	123,22%
OI 1.2.1 Number of nature protected areas addressed by interventions	17	24	141,18%
OI 1.2.2 Number of capacity building / awareness activities related to nature protection, sustainable use and management of common natural resources	39	61	156,41%
OI 1.2.3 Number of people involved in training and capacity building activities in the field of nature protection	749	1038	138,58%
OI 1.2.4 Number of joint initiatives addressing preservation of marine and coastal environment (incl. litter reduction)	5	8	160,00%
OI 1.2.5 Number of joint management plans/ coordinated specific conservation activities for protected areas	4	13	325,00%

OI 2.1.1 Total length of reconstructed or upgraded access roads to natural, cultural and historic tourism sites	7,84	13,523	172,49%
OI 2.1.2 Total length of newly built, reconstructed or upgraded cycling routes / walking paths	9,88	29,742	301,03%
OI 2.1.3 Number of newly built / reconstructed facilities in / leading to touristic sites	19	20	105,26%
OI 2.1.4 Number of reconstructed / restored cultural and historical touristic sites	15	16	106,67%
OI 2.2.1 Number of sustainable tourism strategies/action plans of common tourist destinations	5	7	140,00%

OI 2.2.2 Number of marketing and promotional initiatives/events, addressing cross-border tourism products & services	19	27	142,11%
OI 2.2.3 Number of tools developed and/or implemented for promotion of sustainable touristic potential	17	22	129,41%
OI 2.2.4 Number of trainings and consultancy services in sustainable use of natural, historical and cultural heritage and resources	7	10	142,86%
OI 2.2.5 Number of people involved in training and capacity building activities in the field of sustainable tourism	200	379	189,50%
OI 2.3.1 Number of networking events	23	44	191,30%
OI 2.3.2 Number of public awareness initiatives promoting sustainable use of natural, historical and cultural heritage and resources	25	60	240,00%
OI 2.3.3 Number of public awareness initiatives promoting alternative forms of tourism	8	14	175,00%

Source: Annual reports, MIS

Following the data provided in table 16 and observation of individual projects, a closer look is taken into each SO for the IPA CBC Bulgaria – Türkiye 2014-2020 programme and its respective OIs to find answers to the evaluation questions related to the second evaluation principle “Estimating impacts” (listed in ToR, ch. 4.2 “Specific work”).

(SO 1.1) To what extent has the Programme contributed to the improvement of the local capacities for preventing and mitigating the consequences of natural and man-made disasters in the cross-border area?

Upon the successful completion of the projects from the first call for proposals, substantial progress has been achieved toward the specific objective. During the first call for proposals, all projects falling under SO 1.1 have successfully achieved their ER, which highlights a positive influence on environmental protection through soft and investment measures. Furthermore, all of the projects under the second call have successfully achieved their desired results with no significant variance between ER and AR, which signifies for realistic goal-setting from the beneficiaries.

On programme level, the OIs experience slight overachievement of targets with 23.22% (OI 1.1.4) up to 40% (OI 1.1.2) over the desired values. As the difference is not as significant, one can conclude for realistic planning of indicators with, however, room for setting more optimistic targets in the future.

Based on the statistical analysis, the activities under SO 1.1 collectively contribute to the improvement of the local capacities for preventing and mitigating the consequences of natural and man-made disasters in the cross-border area.

(SO 1.2) To what extent has the Programme contributed to the improvement of the capacity for nature protection, sustainable use and management of common natural resources through cooperation initiatives in the cross-border area?

During the first and second call for proposals, all projects falling under SO 1.2 have successfully achieved their ER. There is a higher AR than the target in OI 1.2.3 in both first and second calls, which highlights a positive contribution to the improvement of the capacity for nature protection, sustainable use and management of common natural resources through soft measures related to cooperation initiatives. However, during the first call there is a shortage of projects addressing OI 1.2.4 and only one project covering OI 1.2.5. During the second call, nonetheless, observed are a number of projects with focus on those two OIs, which signifies for proper selection on programme level.

Furthermore, upon a comprehensive review of the output indicators at the program level, it is evident that the achievements have far exceeded the initial expectations. This is especially true for OI 1.2.5 with 325% achievement. When the program's accomplishments demonstrate a high level of target achievement, it becomes feasible to concentrate on projects characterized by a broader scope of activities, increased financial requirements, and a larger number of partners involved. This is applied within this objective with the restricted third call for proposals with a single project that encompasses all of those features.

Based on the statistical analysis, the activities under SO 1.2 collectively contribute to the improvement of the capacity for nature protection, sustainable use and management of common natural resources through cooperation initiatives in the cross-border region, such as capacity building and awareness initiatives, training activities and coordinated specific conservation activities for protected areas.

(SO 2.1) To what extent has the Programme contributed to the increase of the touristic attractiveness of the cross-border region?

Upon observation nearly all projects falling under SO 1.2 successfully met their expected results. This pattern suggests that beneficiaries possessed a clear and comprehensive understanding of the requirements and had effectively prepared their projects accordingly. One notable exception, however, is project CB005.1.21.139, which fell significantly short of its objective, achieving less than half of the anticipated value. It was explained that this underachievement was due to a calculation error made during the project proposal preparation, which was only discovered in the later stages of implementation. As a result, the controlling body determined that this objective had not been met for the project.

At programme level, the indicators have achieved and even surpassed their targets. A significant variance between ER and AR is observed in OI 2.1.1 (172,49%) and OI 2.1.2 (301,03%). This poses as an opportunity for setting more optimistic targets in the future for similar activities related to reconstruction/ construction of roads.

Based on the statistical analysis, it is evident that the activities under SO 2.1 collectively contribute to increasing the touristic attractiveness of the cross-border area through better utilisation of natural, cultural and historical heritage and related infrastructure.

(SO 2.2) To what extent has the Programme contributed to the increase of the cross-border tourism potential?

At project level, the observed activities under SO 2.2 were successfully implemented with no significant under or over achievement of targets. These facts underscore the beneficiaries' strong preparedness in designing their projects and indicate that the program has effectively maximized its available financial resources, resulting in a positive impact on increasing the cross-border tourism potential.

At programme level, the OIs experience slight overachievement with the most significance in OI 2.2.5 (189.5%). This observation suggests for positive impacts related to training and capacity building activities in the field of sustainable tourism.

Based on the statistical analysis it is evident that the activities under SO 2.2 collectively contribute to the increase of the cross-border tourism potential.

(SO 2.3) To what extent has the Programme contributed to increasing cross-border networking for development of sustainable tourism through cross-border cooperation initiatives?

Upon observation of the individual projects, the observed activities under SO 2.3 were successfully implemented with no significant under or over achievement of targets. These facts underscore the beneficiaries' strong preparedness in designing their projects and indicate that the program has effectively maximized its available financial resources, resulting in a positive impact on increasing the cross-border border networking for development of sustainable tourism.

Upon observation of the OIs at programme level, observed are higher results than the expected with OI 2.3.1 at 191,3%, OI 2.3.2 at 240% and OI 2.3.3 at 175% of achievement. The analysis suggests that the programme has achieved higher impact with the available resources, however, continuous evaluation of indicators to redirect funds to underperforming areas or emerging needs, will enhance the positive impact of the programme on the CBC region.

Nevertheless, based on the statistical analysis it is evident that the activities under SO 2.3 collectively contribute to increasing cross-border networking for development of sustainable tourism through cross-border cooperation initiatives.

With the present analysis of the projects and OIs under IPA CBC Bulgaria – Türkiye 2014-2020 programme, managed by the republic of Bulgaria, as well as the given answers to the evaluation questions, it can be concluded that the programme has achieved positive contribution towards achieving its objectives and addressing the regional needs.

Furthermore, with the above information in mind, several overall observations can be made. Firstly, it's evident that all of Output Indicators (OIs) have exceeded their respective targets, whereas some reach exceptionally high results with over 200% (OI 1.2.5, OI 2.1.2, OI 2.3.2). Furthermore, there is a number of projects with more than 50% overachievement of their initial targets – OI 1.2.2, OI 1.2.4, OI 2.1.1, OI 2.2.5, OI 2.3.1 and OI 2.3.3. Overall, it can be concluded that of all OIs, 42.86% have achieved above +50% up to +325% (OI 1.2.5) more than the expected results. The substantial variance between the Achieved Result and the

Target value indicates an opportunity for more precise planning in the future, possibly warranting higher target values.

For the rest 57.14% of OIs it can be considered that they have achieved slight overreach of targets compared to the others. For OIs with 25% or less overachievement of targets (OI 1.1.4, 2.1.3, 2.1.4) it can be concluded that presence of realistic planning both at the program and project levels is in place.

Based on the analysis, a significant insight emerges. When the program's accomplishments demonstrate a high level of target achievement, it becomes feasible for the Managing Authority to concentrate on projects characterized by a broader scope of activities, increased financial requirements, and a larger number of partners involved. As is evident in the third call for proposals under the program. By emphasizing such projects, the impact across the region amplifies, enabling more effective and efficient solutions to address the regional needs. The strategic focus on larger-scale initiatives supports the program's ability to deliver substantial and enduring outcomes for the communities it serves.

An example of such a project is CB005.2.21.059 “Living Ancient Towns - Asagipinar and Rusokastro”. This project encompasses both large-scale infrastructural activities and incorporates soft measures for promotion and event organisation, which further bolsters the popularization of its outcomes. The project's effectiveness is evident through its high absorption rate, highlighting its adept financial planning and execution, as well as demonstrating the efficient allocation and utilization of resources.

Figure 4 Case Study. CB005.2.21.059 “Living Ancient Towns - Asagipinar and Rusokastro”

The **project CB005.2.21.059 “Living Ancient Towns - Asagipinar and Rusokastro,”** managed by Kirklareli District Directorate of Culture and Tourism and the Municipality of Kameno, aimed to unlock the historical and archaeological potential of the Cross-border area. This initiative sought to **increase tourism attractiveness by reconstructing and socializing two essential archaeological tourism sites:** the Rusokastro Fortress area in Kameno/Bourgas and the Asagipinar open-air museum. Through the implementation of small-scale constructions, electricity infrastructure improvements, and the development of recreational areas, these historical sites have been revitalized, making them more appealing to visitors.

The project's success is evident not only in its physical improvements but also in its **innovative approach.** The introduction of diverse recreational facilities, online promotion of the sites, and collaboration with local tour operators have bolstered the sustainability of these sites. The **strong partnership** established during the project, along with the engagement of various local tour agents, ensures that these historical locations will continue to attract visitors and contribute to the region's cultural and historical significance for years to come.

UNDERSTANDING IMPACTS AND SHOWING WHAT WORKS BEST IN TERMS OF EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY: WHAT MECHANISMS OF PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION HAVE DELIVERED THE OBSERVED IMPACT?

The following chapter deals with the third evaluation principle and the specific evaluation question “What are the factors facilitating that contribution? Are there any unintended effects of the programme in this field?” given in the ToR, which is the same for all three programmes and their respective SOs. Therefore, a combined approach is taken to answer the evaluation question.

An examination of the processes employed throughout the programming period offers valuable insights into the program's implementation effectiveness, efficiency, and their impact on regional development. Equally important is comprehending the programs' synergy and contribution to EU strategic and methodological documents, shedding light on their broader impacts in line with the Union's common objectives. Additionally, feedback gathered from focus groups interviews and surveys will illuminate public perceptions of the program's outcomes and any unintended consequences it may have had on the local population. Lastly, the sustainability of these results is a critical aspect to comprehensively assess the efficacy and efficiency of these impacts. This chapter is dedicated to exploring these dimensions to address the evaluation question at hand.

Effectiveness and efficiency of mechanisms

To illustrate the effectiveness and efficiency of the mechanisms employed through the implementation of the Interreg IPA CBC 2014-2020 programmes, managed by the Republic of Bulgaria, the evaluation team took the approach of examining the projects implementation lifecycle and its accompanying challenges and best practices.

During the **application process**, a few conclusions were drawn based on research data from surveys, focus groups and interviews amongst representatives of the Managing bodies and beneficiaries.

The assessment of managing bodies indicates a high level of understanding of the Application Guidelines, with a perceived low risk to the application process, scoring 4.06 out of 5.

Survey results from managing bodies reveal that common difficulties faced by beneficiaries during the application process are not significantly prevalent.

These findings are consistent with the collective perspective of beneficiaries in focus groups, who generally perceive the application process and strategic documents as clear, presenting no substantial challenges. Turkish partners, however, commonly seek external assistance from consultancy agencies to align their projects with PRAG rules, acknowledging the differences in their accustomed procedures but not considering this a significant challenge.

Furthermore, locating suitable partners is typically not a major hurdle. Many participants in the focus groups and interviews represent well-established organisations like municipalities and regional associations with extensive experience in CBC programs. They

have already built networks of collaborating organisations, facilitating partner selection based on the projects they intend to pursue. Smaller or newer organisations to the programs have found the partner events organized by the Managing Authority to be helpful, suggesting that setting them at an earlier stage could enhance the effectiveness of realizing project ideas after identifying the right partners.

A commonly voiced concern during the project preparation stage pertains to the application deadlines, which beneficiaries perceive as increasingly tight in the 2021 - 2027 period. While these deadlines posed relatively manageable challenges for projects involving soft measures, they have become a more significant issue for investment projects with infrastructure components. The compressed timeframes raise the risk that organisations may struggle to prepare all the necessary documents promptly, leading some to consider altering their project directions or opting not to apply altogether. This observation highlights the importance of considering more accommodating deadlines for future programming periods to enhance the feasibility of project development and application.

In relation to the **implementation stage**, several observations were made.

First and foremost, it's important to acknowledge the overwhelmingly positive feedback concerning the effectiveness of communication between project beneficiaries and the Joint secretariats (JS). Throughout the evaluation process, the project team consistently encountered praise for the responsiveness and flexibility of the JS, especially during challenging situations that could jeopardize project implementation. In one specific instance from the BG-MK program, a beneficiary shared challenges related to inefficient partnership between the two partnering organisations, promptly resolved through the immediate intervention of the JS. Additionally, the programs demonstrated commendable flexibility in coping with crises, notably the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a significant impact on various projects, especially those involving on-site event activities and the tourism sector.

Conversely, when it comes to the validation of funds, payments, and inspections, the opinions were more varied, with fewer instances of positive feedback. The research findings indicate that the FLC control process often consumes more time and resources, subsequently leading to delays in payments. Some examples highlight cases where the FLC control personnel changed multiple times, resulting in protracted verification and payment processes, essentially resetting the procedure multiple times. This predicament poses a notable challenge, particularly for organisations with limited capacity, such as NGOs, as their budgets frequently cannot accommodate prolonged payment delays, potentially causing project finalization delays. Some suggestions put forward involve either increasing the advance payment percentage or shortening the verification period from 90 to 60 days to alleviate these concerns.

Nonetheless, when it comes to **results** the overall view of project partners is highly positive. The benefits extend beyond the projects, encompassing the quality of networks and partnerships, which have played a pivotal role in driving positive project outcomes. This is solidified by the survey results from beneficiaries, garnering an impressive overall score of

4.43 out of 5 for the effectiveness of communication and relationship establishment. This sentiment also emerges as the predominant theme in all focus groups and interviews, with a majority of participants highlighting it as one of the key advantages of participating in the program.

Moreover, the results of the projects often exhibit sustainability and stimulate the generation of new ideas for continuing their impact. For instance, project CB007.2.12.032 "Via Militaris-A Corridor for Sustainable Tourism Development" serves as an exemplar, with project partners emphasizing its place among several initiatives, each focusing on diverse facets of the development and promotion of this historically and touristic significant and valuable route spanning between the participating countries.

Figure 5 Case Study. CB007.2.12.032 "Via Militaris - A Corridor for Sustainable Tourism Development"

Project **CB007.2.12.032**, "Via Militaris - A Corridor for Sustainable Tourism Development," managed by RDA South and AED Kostinbrod, had a clear objective: to enhance the natural and cultural heritage sites along Via Militaris, adding value to them and boosting their touristic potential. The project aimed to generate economic benefits for the cross-border region's population. Despite facing challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, the project's effectiveness shone through as it completed its targets, with just a minor delay. This success significantly impacted the previously struggling region, rejuvenating economic prospects and livelihoods through innovative pro-tourism initiatives. The project fostered economic growth, reduced poverty, and diversified the region's economic landscape.

The project's innovation in cross-border tourism development is evident in its creation of an attractive and affordable Via Militaris cross-border tourism concept, a sustainable action plan, and a sustainable tourism product. The introduction of a web-based tourist information and co-creation platform, the Living Lab, revolutionized the tourist experience. Effective communication, leadership, and management among partners made the project a success, leading to long-term partnerships within and outside the CBC program. The establishment of a network of local tourist agents and their pursuit of new ideas for the route underscore the project's sustainability, as it serves as a model for similar projects under the CBC program, aiming to sustain and build upon the progress achieved along the Via Militaris route.

Overall, upon a comprehensive examination of the project lifecycle, the positive outcomes underscore the effectiveness and efficiency of program mechanisms in fostering sustainable development in the regions. These observations also highlight areas for potential program enhancement, emphasizing the program's continuous commitment to further improve its performance and impact.

Synergy and contribution of the programme towards strategic and methodological documents

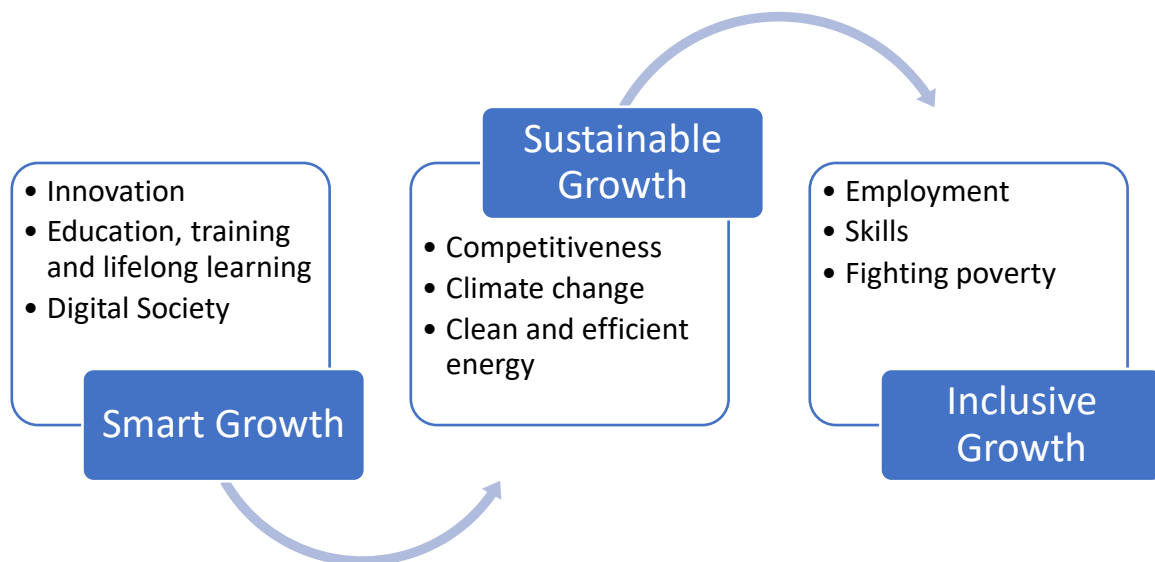
The INTERREG-IPA CBC 2014 -2020 Programmes, managed by the Republic of Bulgaria are developed within the context of the European strategy for smart, inclusive, and sustainable

growth and in alignment with relevant national strategic documents. The programme is structured to incorporate key policy framework at European, macro-regional, and national level, which are integrated as follows:

The Europe 2020: A European Strategy for Smart, Sustainable, and Inclusive Growth

The Europe 2020 strategy outlines a comprehensive and ambitious agenda for the EU to achieve smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth over the course of a decade, with a target completion year of 2020. The strategy focuses on addressing the economic and social challenges faced by EU member states and aims to transform the EU into a more competitive and cohesive region. The Europe 2020 strategy includes specific goals and targets under each of its three pillars: Smart Growth, Sustainable Growth, and Inclusive Growth.

Figure 6 Europe 2020 strategy. Pillars



Within the framework of the goal “Sustainable growth” – Competitiveness, the EC has set itself the goal to enhance the competitiveness of the European tourism sector. The measures implemented under all three programmes within PA “Tourism” and PA “Competitiveness” (BG- can be characterized as primarily focused on enhancing the competitiveness of the cross-border region, particularly in the context of tourism and SMEs. Example projects are:

- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-MK*: CB006.1.12.175, CB006.1.22.033, CB006.1.23.196, CB006.1.31.019, CB006.1.31.021
- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-RS*: CB007.1.11.151, CB007.1.11.220, CB007.1.12.174
- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-TR*: CB005.1.12.115, CB005.2.21.046, CB005.1.23.033

Furthermore, the suggested measures under PA “Environment” for all three programmes align with the major climate change and biodiversity challenges identified in the European territorial cooperation strategy. Additionally, projects conducted in collaboration reflect the

attributes specified in the working document in terms of “joint management and promotion of shared major geographic features”. Example projects are:

- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-MK*: CB006.1.11.013, CB006.2.12.122, CB006.1.12.042, CB006.1.12.072
- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-RS*: CB007.1.31.316, CB007.1.31.348, CB007.1.32.318
- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-TR*: CB005.1.11.084, CB005.1.11.165, CB005.1.11.006, CB005.1.12.008, CB005.1.12.082, CB005.2.12.016

On the other hand, the supported measures under PA 2. “Youth” of the BG-RS programme are in line with what was laid down in the goal “Inclusive Growth”. Example projects are: CB007.1.21.129, CB007.1.21.159, CB007.1.22.039.

The European Territorial Cooperation strategy and the role of the Cross Border Cooperation

The European Territorial Agenda 2020 identifies some key challenges and potentials for territorial development. These include increased exposure to globalisation, demographic changes, social and economic exclusion, climate change, and loss of biodiversity. It describes the European territorial cooperation as *“... a key factor in global competition... facilitating better utilisation of development potentials and the protection of natural environment”*.

Given the supported measures under the IPA CBC 2014-2020 programmes, managed by the Republic of Bulgaria, it can be concluded that they have an indirect effect on the obstacles defined in the strategy. Moreover, the environmental measures align with the challenges, identified in the strategic document, for climate change. Example projects are:

- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-MK*: CB006.1.11.103, CB006.1.12.072, CB006.1.21.191, CB006.1.22.142, CB006.1.23.135, CB006.1.31.017
- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-RS*: CB007.1.32.361, CB007.1.11.151, CB007.1.12.174, CB007.1.21.129
- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-TR*: CB005.1.11.005, CB005.2.12.024, CB005.1.21.099, CB005.1.22.063, CB005.1.23.057

The European Strategy for the Danube Region

The INTERREG-IPA CBC Programmes Bulgaria-Serbia and Bulgaria – North Macedonia contribute to and interact with the macro-regional strategy that the EU has devised for the countries and regions that share common needs and goals in the Danube Region. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), established in December 2010, includes four key pillars:

- Connecting the Danube Region,
- Protecting the environment in the Danube Region,
- Building prosperity in the Danube Region and
- Strengthening the Danube Region.

The measures outlined in the two programmes are in complete alignment with the pillars of the strategy. Example projects are:

- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-MK*: CB006.1.11.103, CB006.1.21.193, CB006.1.23.196, CB006.1.31.017
- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-RS*: CB007.1.11.095, CB007.2.13.174, CB007.2.13.012, CB007.2.32.025

Strategic Frameworks for Bulgaria 2014 - 2020: EU Partnership Agreement

The Bulgarian Partnership Agreement underscores the pivotal role of CBC programs in alignment with the EU development strategy. These programs should also stress the significance of advancing employment, sustainable tourism, and cultural heritage while fostering cooperation among communities. All three programmes are in line with the pillars of the strategy as they focus on measures under PA “Tourism”, which address similar needs. Example projects are:

- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-MK*: CB006.2.21.143, CB006.2.22.128, CB006.2.23.115
- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-RS*: CB007.1.11.307, CB007.2.12.068, CB007.2.13.188
- *IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 BG-TR*: CB005.2.21.071, CB005.2.22.010, CB005.2.23.038

Strategic Frameworks for Serbia: Strategy Paper for Serbia 2014-2020

The objective of pre-accession assistance will be to promote territorial cooperation with a view to strengthen cross-border, transnational cooperation, foster the socio- economic development of the border regions as well as develop administrative capacities at local and regional levels through participation in cross-border activities: “A key objective of the Serbia-Bulgaria Cross-Border Cooperation Programme is to tackle the lack of competitiveness in the socio-economic development in the relevant area as compared to EU development levels. Another aim is to face common challenges in the environment and nature protection, as well as in relation to cross-border emergency situations.” The measures outlined in the programme are in complete alignment with the information provided. Example projects are: CB007.1.11.268, CB007.1.21.288, CB007.1.31.189.

EC Country Strategy Paper 2014-2020 for EU assistance to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

The Country Strategy Paper 2014-2020, outlining EU assistance to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, places significant emphasis on reforms within the rule of law and fundamental rights sector. This paper serves as the nation's blueprint for the assistance it will receive in areas such as competitiveness and innovation, transportation and development, education, employment and social policies, as well as the environment sector. Furthermore, this Country Strategy Paper underscores that the country's cross-border cooperation programs will prioritize the socio-economic advancement of border regions. It highlights the importance of maintaining people-to-people initiatives, human resource development, and information sharing as integral components of individual programs. The measures outlined in the programme are in complete alignment with the information provided. Example projects are: CB006.1.23.196, CB006.2.23.116, CB006.2.31.130, CB006.1.31.083.

Programme impacts and unintended effects

The following sub-chapter explores topics concerning the **sustainability of program results**, benefits of participation in the program and the unexpected impacts of the program on the regions. The analysis is based on data from survey, one-on-one interviews and focus group results, which were conducted with beneficiaries and managing bodies. All survey results are measured on a scale of 1 (negative) to 5 (positive).

To begin with, in relation to the achievements of the projects towards the organisations and regions across these programs, compared to their initial expectations, survey results reveal several common themes and some variations in their impacts. The most significant commonality is the positive change in behavioral impacts on the region's population and the tourism sector. This positive change is evident in the survey results, which show a substantial shift in the level of achievement of the impacts on organisations when compared with their original expectations.

Table 20 Summarised Survey Results. Q: How do you assess the level of achievement of the impacts on your organisation now compared with your original expectations?

	Behavioral impacts	Tourism impacts
BG - MK	3.45	3.08
BG - RS	3.22	3.14
BG - TR	4.04	4.08

Moreover, the survey results also shed light on the unforeseen impacts of these cross-border projects on the regions involved. The findings illustrate an increased tourism attractiveness, enhanced capacity for sustainable tourism, and a noticeable positive shift in social impacts. These unexpected impacts underscore the interconnectedness of the projects, as responses were collected from project partners across all participating sectors (SOs).

Table 21 Summarised Survey Results. Q: To what extent do you/ did you anticipate any of the following impacts beyond your organisation from your exploitable outcomes?

	Increased level of tourism attractiveness	Improved level of capacity for sustainable tourism	Increase in social impacts
BG - MK	2.79	2.70	3.45
BG - RS	3.42	4.03	4.00
BG - TR	4.40	4.28	4.28

While the positive changes observed in the region's population, reflected in the social and behavioral impacts, suggest progress that extends beyond the program's predefined frameworks, there are some variations in the impact experienced by different types of organisations. Feedback from the focus groups indicates that the impact is more substantial for institutions equipped with budgets for investment projects, such as municipalities. In contrast, smaller organisations like NGOs, with limited capacity, often undertake soft

projects, resulting in a less substantial impact. However, it's worth noting that these soft projects have been well-received by their target audiences, and organisations are committed to achieving greater sustainability, knowledge dissemination, and the continuation of activities beyond the project's timeline, often through personal funding when new EU funding is unavailable.

Furthermore, examples were shared of external initiatives that originated from these cross-border projects, contributing to the enhancement of the regions. These projects have played a critical role in supporting their respective communities, leading to noticeable positive effects.

On another note, survey results reveal that the most significant benefits of the programs are related to improved performance, competences, and skills of the participating organisations, better access to networks and higher interest in seeking partnerships with other European countries), as well as a higher profile in the EU community.

Table 22 Summarised Survey Results. Q: “What are the impacts/ expected impacts on your organisation from participating in the specific cross-border project (i.e. how will your organisation benefit from the exploitable outcomes)?”

	Improved performance of your organisation	Improved competences and skills	Increased interest in seeking partnerships with organisations in other European countries	Improved access to networks	Higher profile in the EU community
<i>BG - MK</i>	4.25	4.63	4.21	4.33	4.50
<i>BG - RS</i>	4.06	4.53	4.19	3.94	3.97
<i>BG - TR</i>	4.24	4.44	4.40	4.32	4.12

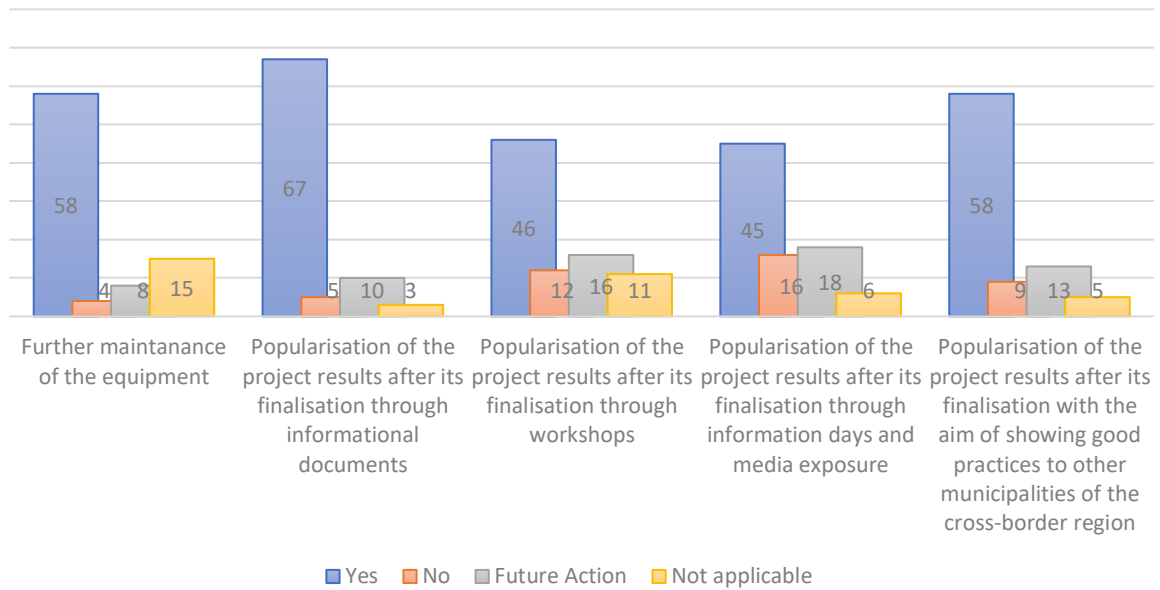
Key findings from the focus groups across all programs highlight the collaboration and networks formed across borders as the most significant takeaway. Organisations express a strong desire to sustain existing relationships and further expand their ongoing initiatives. The collaborative networks formed across borders are key drivers of progress and development, with examples provided for even further advancement of projects due to newly developed relationships.

Lastly, concerning the maintenance of project results, beneficiaries have indicated significant efforts towards ensuring sustainability. Even though, after careful examination of the application guidelines for the three programs, also mentioned in Ch. “Identifying Changes”, it is evident that there is insufficient emphasis on sustainability, both in terms of the requirements for the Beneficiaries and the evaluation criteria, which could be considered a notable weakness..

The majority of survey participants have emphasized ongoing maintenance of equipment and the promotion of results through information dissemination, workshops, media

exposure, and the sharing of best practices with other interested parties. This commitment to sustaining project results is further confirmed by the focus groups.

Graph 2 Summarised Survey Results. Q: Which of the following actions have you undertaken (or are planning) to maintain your project results?



In summary, the impact of these cross-border programs, as assessed through research findings, demonstrates their significant contributions to regional development. The overall positive sentiment regarding the programs' advantages compared to other national programs is evident. However, variations in impact do exist, with more administrative flexibility suggested for smaller organisations to maximize their soft project impacts. Nonetheless, the collaborative networks formed across borders are a standout feature, with organisations keen on sustaining existing relationships and expanding ongoing initiatives, contributing to a broader and more effective impact on the regions' development.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following chapter explores based on the research findings present in Ch. “Findings and answers to the evaluation questions”, as well as provides recommendations for more result-oriented programmes/ projects in the upcoming 2021 – 2027 programming period. The information is presented in line with the Evaluation design, following the three major evaluation principles.

Evaluation principle 1. <i>Identifying Changes</i>		
Conclusions	Key achievements	Recommendations
<p>The Interreg IPA CBC programmes have succeeded in advancing the development of cross-border regions across social, cultural, environmental, and business-related dimensions. These initiatives have led to significant and positive changes in the regions, enriching the overall well-being of the local communities. However, as the data reveals, the fund allocation per capita, though essential, might not be adequate to sustain these positive transformations in the long term. Despite the incremental growth in funding from one programming period to the next, it is evident that there is a growing need for progressively larger financial resources to address the</p>	<p>Increase in Governance Capacity: The three programs have contributed to enhance governance capacity through the development of strategic and methodological documents, training programs, and networking events.</p> <p>Environmental Protection and Preservation: Efforts have been made to protect and preserve the environment through investment activities and soft measures, such as disaster prevention and the promotion of sustainable environmental practices.</p> <p>Tourism Development: The potential for tourism development has been strengthened through the restoration of heritage sites, improved accessibility to tourist destinations, and visitor management plans. This has resulted in an increase in nights spent in the cross-border region.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sustainable Funding: To address the increasing financial demands and to reach better regional cohesion of the cross-border regions, it is essential to proactively allocate progressively larger funds in the future. This approach ensures the long-term sustainability of the positive changes achieved through these programs. 2. Balanced Resource Allocation: Encouraging more comprehensive projects, particularly those encompassing larger set of activities in both investment and soft measures, can lead to a more effective and efficient allocation of resources. This way a higher impact will be achieved through better funding absorption rate. 3. Improved Monitoring and Evaluation: To effectively gauge the impact of funded



<p>multifaceted needs of these regions effectively.</p>	<p>Economic Development: Local businesses have benefited from increased competitiveness and economic development, facilitated by the establishment of information systems, support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and cross-border networking opportunities.</p> <p>Cultural Preservation: Commitment to the preservation of shared traditions and values in borderland areas has been promoted through events and activities.</p> <p>Networking and Relationship Building: The programs have successfully broken-down communication barriers between Bulgaria and its neighbouring IPA beneficiary countries, fostering neighbourly relations and promoting knowledge exchange. Beneficiaries have reported that the programs have facilitated valuable networking opportunities and relationship building.</p>	<p>interventions, it is crucial to address refining the result indicators based on SMART principles to enable accurate measurement and monitoring of meaningful change. With this in mind, it is pertinent to develop an RI catalogue, which will support the whole project lifecycle and the programme respectively.</p> <p>4. According to the EU's concept of implementing programs with a focus on a greater long-term effect, in the next period stricter requirements should be laid down for taking measures for the sustainability of the projects, which in turn would guarantee, already at the application stage, that a project can be self-sustaining or has a clear concept of continued durability after grant funding is exhausted.</p>
<p>Evaluation principle 2. Estimating Impacts</p>		
<p>Conclusions</p>	<p>Key achievements</p>	<p>Recommendations</p>
<p>The analysis of the three Interreg IPA CBC 2014 – 2020 programmes, managed by the Republic of Bulgaria, reveals several key conclusions. Firstly, all programs exhibit a strong commitment</p>	<p>The key achievements of the programs are substantial and demonstrate a significant positive impact on the development of the respective regions, as well as effective fund absorption. The analysis indicates that the</p>	<p>5. Review Target Values: Consideration should be given to reviewing and adjusting target values for Output Indicators. Where feasible, setting higher targets for OIs that have consistently exceeded expectations. This will</p>



<p>to aligning their efforts with the strategic objectives, as evidenced by the relevance of Specific Objectives (SOs) to Priority Axes (PAs).</p> <p>One common conclusion that applies to all three programs is the concentration of resources in two primary areas: tourism and environment. This allocation reflects the high-priority needs of the regions and is in line with the program's strategies and feedback from target groups. However, an overlap in thematic intervention fields has been observed, which calls for a more precise and focused approach in future programming periods to better measure the program's impact and enhance efficiency. This approach has been applied in the 2021 – 2027 programming period, as evident in the programme document.</p> <p>Regarding Output Indicators (OIs), the programs have achieved a high level of success. The majority of OIs have surpassed their targets, with some exceeding their expected results by over 50%, highlighting an opportunity for</p>	<p>anticipated changes aligned with the SOs have not only been met but have been exceeded, resulting in highly favorable outcomes for the regions. The projects under these programs have realized and even, in many cases, surpassed initial expectations.</p> <p>Specifically, a project that exemplifies the positive effects on the region is "CB006.2.31.040 Social Enterprise Ecosystem Development." This project represents a focus on the long-term well-being of the population and contributes to the development of sustainable tourism, nature protection, and environmental enhancement.</p>	<p>provide a more challenging yet realistic benchmark for future projects.</p> <p>6. Encourage Strategic Indicator Setting: While the deliberate setting of conservative indicator values can be a strategic approach for project success, encouraging beneficiaries to set realistic yet ambitious targets will ensure accurate assessment while fostering project effectiveness.</p> <p>7. Promote Knowledge Sharing: Consideration should be given to facilitating knowledge sharing among program beneficiaries to exchange best practices and lessons learned. Creating a platform for collaboration, whether through the programmes' website and social media platforms and/ or organising in-person events to encourage discussion between beneficiaries to collaborate regarding their connected projects, can enhance project outcomes and encourage innovative approaches to address common challenges.</p> <p>8. Continuous Adaptability: It is essential to maintain the programs' adaptability by reallocating resources based on achievements and shifting priorities.</p>
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<p>more precise planning with potentially higher target values in the future. Additionally, a portion of OIs has been achieved slightly beyond their targets, indicating a realistic approach to planning at both the program and project levels. It is essential to consider the variability in achieving target values.</p>		<p>Continuously assessing the effectiveness of interventions to redirect funds to underperforming areas or emerging needs, will enhance the positive impact of the programmes on the regions.</p>
<p>Evaluation principle 3. Understanding Impacts</p>		
<p>Conclusions</p>	<p>Key achievements</p>	<p>Recommendations</p>
<p>An examination of the implementation of the Interreg IPA CBC 2014-2020 programmes, managed by the Republic of Bulgaria, provides valuable insights into their effectiveness and efficiency. The evaluation team discovered several key conclusions that underscore the program's impact.</p> <p>Beneficiaries generally display a strong understanding of the Application Guidelines, with low perceived risk in the application process, signifying a well-structured and comprehensible system. Challenges in the application process are not significantly prevalent, and the</p>	<p>The analysis of the Interreg IPA CBC programmes reveals several noteworthy achievements.</p> <p>Organisations participating in these programs have experienced positive impacts, with a substantial shift in behavioural and tourism-related impacts on the region's population. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the projects in fostering change.</p> <p>Additionally, the projects have contributed to increased tourism attractiveness, enhanced capacity for sustainable tourism, and positive social impacts.</p> <p>The survey results also indicate that beneficiaries have experienced benefits such</p>	<p>9. Address Application Deadlines: Given the concerns regarding tight application deadlines, especially for investment projects, it is advisable to reconsider and potentially extend these deadlines for future programming periods. This adjustment can facilitate the preparation of necessary documents, reduce financial strain, and encourage more organisations to apply.</p> <p>10. Validation and Payment Processes: To minimize delays and financial constraints for organisations, improvements to either expedite the validation of funds and payment processes and/ or increasing the advance payment percentage could be considered to alleviate these concerns.</p>



<p>application and strategic documents are viewed as clear and unproblematic.</p> <p>However, there is a growing concern about tight application deadlines, particularly for investment projects involving infrastructure components. This issue might deter organisations from applying and underscores the need for more accommodating deadlines.</p> <p>The communication and cooperation between project beneficiaries and the joint secretariats have been exceptionally effective and flexible, ensuring project success.</p> <p>However, the validation of funds and payment processes could be revisited to avoid delays and financial constraints for some organisations.</p>	<p>as improved performance, competences, and skills of the participating organisations, better access to networks and higher interest in seeking partnerships with other European countries), as well as a higher profile in the EU community.</p> <p>Collaborative networks formed across borders are identified as a significant takeaway, fostering relationships that drive progress and development.</p> <p>Furthermore, organisations have shown a strong commitment to maintaining project results through various activities, ensuring sustainability.</p>	<p>11. Promote Cross-Border Collaboration: The strong emphasis on collaborative networks formed across borders should be further encouraged and nurtured. Supporting organisations in sustaining existing relationships and expanding their initiatives will contribute to more effective regional development.</p>
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ANNEX 1. LIST OF DOCUMENTS

- INTERREG-IPA CBC Programme Bulgaria – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.
- Interim Implementation Evaluation Executive Summary for the 2014-2020 programming period.
- Documentation package from the First call for project proposals including Q&A (Parts I – IV), PIM Version 1 (October 2016), Version 2 (January 2017), Version 3 (March 2017), Version 4 (October 2017); Methodology for assessment of output indicators fulfilment.
- Documentation package from the Second call for project proposals including Q&A (16.08.2019), PIM Version 1 (July 2019), Version 2 (January 2020), Version 3 (August 2020), Version 4 (March 2022); Guidelines for FLC Version 1.4 (December 2020).
- Annual Implementation reports for the period 2014 – 2020
- INTERREG – IPA CBC Programme Bulgaria – Serbia.
- Interim Implementation Evaluation Executive Summary for the 2014-2020 programming period.
- Documentation package from the First call for project proposals including Q&A (15.03.2018); PIM Version (November 2016), Version 2 (January 2017), Version 4 (October 2017); Guidelines for FLC Version 1.1 (June 2016), Version 1.2. (June 2017).
- Documentation package from the Second call for project proposals including Q&A (21.07.2020); PIM Version 1 (May 2019), Version 2 (January 2020), Version 3 (August 2020), Version 4 (March 2022), Guidelines for FLC Version 1.4 (August 2020).
- INTERREG-IPA CBC Programme Bulgaria – Türkiye.
- Interim Implementation Evaluation Executive Summary for the 2014-2020 programming period.
- Documentation package from the First call for project proposals including Q&A (Part I), PIM Version 1 (July 2020), Version 2 (August 2020), Version 3 (March 2022); Guidelines for FLC (April 2018).
- Documentation package from the Second call for project proposals including Q&A; PIM Version 1 (July 2020), Version 2 (August 2020), Version 3 (March 2022), Guidelines for FLC (April 2018).
- Documentation package from the Third call for project proposals including PIM Version 1.1. (October 2020); Guidelines for FLC (July 2020).