

Art of Cooperation - Challenges of the Interreg Next Programmes panel discussion summary

Under the moderation of TESIM, the workshop involved representatives of the four Eastern Interreg NEXT programmes in which Ukraine participates. The structure of the session foresaw a first block devoted to the adaptation of the programmes 2014-2020 to the crisis situation stemming from the Russian aggression on Ukraine and a second block devoted to looking ahead to what Interreg NEXT programmes 2021-2027 will deliver in the eligible territories.

During the first part, participants shared what they were confronted to when the invasion started, both at programme and at partner level. The response actions included an increased programme presence in the cooperation area, including increased monitoring efforts, the need to provide for extensions of the grant contract, with the necessary contract addenda - which in some cases implied an enhanced provision of EU funds to projects, in particular those with an infrastructure component – as well as an enhanced communication and collaboration between the programme structures and with the European Commission to address these challenges, leading in some cases to the revision of the legislation in Ukraine. They furthermore explained how implementation changed from the ordinary world, highlighting those factors that proved more challenging to the actors in the field. This refers in particular to the dissolution of project teams following the displacement of experienced project staff or their involvement in military or humanitarian actions, the diminished financial capacity to sustain project activities and cash flow, the depreciation of the national currency, the increase of prices for equipment, construction materials and works and the lack of labour force, which affected the proper execution of contracts related to infrastructure works. They likewise presented how the closure of ENI CBC projects is proceeding, pointing out at the lessons which should be taken into account by those stakeholders who intend to participate in the NEXT programmes.

In terms of future, TESIM presented the strategic orientations of the concerned Interreg NEXT programmes, highlighting the novelties that the allocation of additional funds has brought. Participants then presented the simplification measures that have been put at disposal of project promoters. They also explained how the awareness raising and capacity building needs are being approached in the current circumstances and what is done to facilitate the involvement of newcomers and the creation of partnerships. All these aspects were analysed having in mind the particular conditions of potential Ukrainian applicants. In terms of the calls for proposals, those programmes more advanced reflected on the outcome of their first calls, whereas those with calls open shared their expectations in terms of outcomes. Despite of the difficulties, programmes have experienced a great interest from the Ukrainian applicants. The EU support proves to be attractive, even for newcomers. The experienced beneficiaries have ready-to-implement plans in the context of Interreg NEXT, expecting simplifications on the bureaucratic processes compared to the ENI CBC period. Partners from Member States also trust in lessened administrative obligations, which the programmes plan to provide in several fields: reporting and payment schemes, measures to address currency fluctuations and the use of simplified cost options. Hopefully, all the planned simplification measures will help in keeping the attention of the potential applicants towards the programmes. Participants concluded hoping that the situation in Ukraine will be normalized very soon so that, following the planning and application phase, the active project implementation may start in less than one year.

