

**INTERREG IPA CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION
PROGRAMME "GREECE – ALBANIA 2014-2020"**

6th JOINT MONITORING COMMITTEE MEETING

12 November 2020

Online meeting via Webex

Brief Minutes & Decisions

The Joint Monitoring Committee (hereinafter referred to as JMC) of the Interreg IPA Cross-Border Cooperation Programme "Greece-Albania 2014-2020" convened for its 6th Joint Monitoring Committee meeting on 12th November 2020, (on-line meeting via Webex) following an invitation by the Hellenic Managing Authority of European Territorial Cooperation Programmes (hereinafter MA), in agreement with the co-chairs.

Mrs Mathilde Konstantopoulou, Advisor to the Special Secretary of ERDF & CF, of the Ministry of Development & Investments, who substitutes Mr Georgios Zervos, Special Secretary of ERDF & CF, who is Chair of the Committee, welcomed the participants, sent the regards of Mr Zervos to the JMC members and wished a fruitful 6th Joint Monitoring Committee meeting.

The floor was passed to Mr Redih Lleshi, Director of Territorial Cooperation Directorate of the Albanian Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, the co-Chair of the Committee, who welcomed the participants, wished a fruitful 6th Joint Monitoring Committee meeting. Mr Lleshi expressed his opinion on the State of Play of the Programme and explained that certain beneficiaries, who have a very poor performance, should be excluded from the partnerships. Thus, we could launch another Call.

The floor was then passed to Ms Magali Lenoel, Programme Manager of DG Regio of the European Commission, who thanked for the opportunity to participate in the meeting.

The floor was then passed to Ms Angeliki Bouziani, Head of the MA, who welcomed the members, wished a successful meeting and suggested that we follow the agenda and discuss any suggestions on the next steps of the Programme at the end of the presentations prepared by MA/JS.

The chair confirmed that quorum was achieved, asked all JMC members to ensure that the Impartiality and Confidentiality are ensured, requested that the draft agenda is adopted and opened the 6th JMC.

The Chair then passed the floor to Mr George Papadopoulos, JS Coordinator, who in his introduction speech mentioned that the Programme, which actually started two years later and has to achieve a very high target of N+3 rule for the first time in 2020 during the pandemic crisis. This year, with the enormous difficulties due to the pandemic, we are managing a cross-border Programme, with closed borders since March.

Nevertheless the MA and JS are making huge efforts to achieve the N+3 rule goal. He also referred to the letter sent by EC mentioning the risk of de-commitment in case the N+3 rule is not achieved. Then he addressed a question to the European Commission representative, whether any possible measures have been taken by EU, in order to facilitate the smooth implementation of the Programme and the achievement of the set goals. Mr Papadopoulos, then, presented the Programme's State of Play.

Discussion took place about the State of Play of the Programme.

Ms Lenoel recognised that the closure of the borders is a big problem with a huge impact on the Programme. Nevertheless, it has to be recognized that implementation issues, as reflected in the very low level of payments (around 5 % at the end of 2019) predate the crisis. These systemic issues are highlighted in the Commission observations on the 2019 annual implementation report. She then asked certain questions:

- What is the forecast for additional payments for the end of 2020?
- Have all projects related to the 5th Call project been contracted?
- Given the liquidity issue at the Albanian side, can the ability to fund the projects with national funds still be confirmed?
- Are there any delays in the signing of the subsidy contracts?
- What is the overall impact of the reward policy?

Mr Papadopoulos answered that one more additional payment is foreseen at the year end, while the N+3 rule goal is expected to be achieved. He also explained that only one project was approved under the 5th Call and the contract has been signed since May 2020. The beneficiaries of this project (3 Albanian and 1 Greek) are well-prepared and they have already started the implementation. He also added that the current overbooking is 123% and the MA/JS expect that it will be reduced and the Programme will close at 100%. The absorption will derive from the discounts that the projects (mainly the infrastructure projects) will get after the tendering procedures.

Regarding the reward policy, the idea is to give beneficiaries the opportunity/possibility to include new activities in their project, and thus, motivate them, trigger their activation and increase their implementation rate. Certainly, these new activities are first approved by JMC.

Ms Bouziani referred to Mr Lleshi's suggestion about launching a new Call and explained that there is not enough time to have a new Call given that the Programme finishes in 2023. Instead, Ms Bouziani suggested that the MA, JS and MEFA closely cooperate on a case by case basis, in order to tackle the problems of the non-active beneficiaries and help them overcome the problems. A common action plan must be drawn to this end.

Mr Lleshi explained that there have been attempts to help the beneficiaries to accelerate their activation without any luck. This is the reason Mr Lleshi considers that a new Call would be a better solution.

Ms Bouziani suggested that these problems should be tackled on a case by case basis and not at a horizontal level.

Mr Emmanuel, General Director, Greek Ministry of Interior, suggested that the inactive beneficiaries can be substituted.

Mr Papadopoulos added that the key to the delays of the Albanian beneficiaries is the lack of financial capacity and they must be supported. He underlined especially the low absorption in the strategic and targeted projects.

Ms Sagona, Head of Unit B2 of the MA mentioned that according to the Call for strategic projects the beneficiaries must be national or regional authorities in accordance with the terms of references. Any change in the partnership, therefore, should respect this rule. She, also, underlined that due to the fact that in many cases in a partnership some of the beneficiaries are implementing with a good level of absorption and some of them with a low level it is not fair for the project to exclude and punish the beneficiaries that already absorb Programme's funds. Thus, what we should do now is to increase the capacity of the current beneficiaries. Ms Sagona also mentioned that according to the Programme Manual, there is a possibility of substituting a beneficiary and the procedure for the substitution is described in the relevant article of the PPM. More specifically, the LB should submit the request to the JS, a re-evaluation by the assessors will follow and after the introduction of the Managing Authority the JMC will decide about the substitution.

Ms Konstantopoulou suggested that Mr Lleshi sends his suggestions to MA/JS in order to check them case by case.

Ms Lenoel asked where we stand with the 5th Call project and if the overbooking of 123% will be absorbed.

Mr Papadopoulos replied that the 5th Call is a Targeted Call, with specific beneficiaries and a specific project and the implementation has already been started. He added that the overbooking will be finally absorbed following the implementation of the projects and the savings from the tendering procedures.

Ms Sagona clarified that based on past experience we need an overbooking of at least 25% or 30% in order not to lose any funds, as the infrastructure projects always receive great discounts .

The floor was then passed to Mr Vasilis Charitantis, Officer of the MA, Unit B2, who presented the 3rd Programme Revision.

Ms Lenoel asked if following the reallocation of 1.000.000€ to the two priority axes, no negative impact on the overall management is ensured. Given the systemic issues, is it certain that the Programme will not be weakened?

Ms Bouziani added that the Programme will not be weakened. This reallocation is the result of savings deriving from less travel costs and less staff salaries.

Mr Charitantis explained that this reallocation will not affect the implementation of the Programme.

Mr Papadopoulos clarified that the modification concerns only the Greek Technical Assistance. The Albanian Technical Assistance is not affected.

Ms Sagona also mentioned that this is a corrective measure in order to avoid losing funds of the Technical assistance at the end of the Programme.

The floor was then passed to Ms Anastasia Brozou, Officer of the MA, Unit D, who presented the Technical Assistance Multiannual Budget Plan.

Ms Lenoel asked a clarification on the verification and Ms Brozou replied that this refers to the TA controllers.

The Chair then passed the floor to Ms A. Papanikolaou, JS Administrative Assistant and Acting Communication Officer, who presented the Communication Plan for 2021.

The floor was then passed the floor to Ms Tesia, Representative of the Region of Epirus, who asked more information about

- the warning letter sent by the EC
- if the EU has taken any measures in respect of the Covid-19 pandemic
- what action will be taken regarding the inactive Albanian beneficiaries

Ms Konstantopoulou replied about the Albanian beneficiaries that, as agreed, MEFA, MA and JS will draw an action plan based on a case by case examination of the situation.

Ms Bouziani explained that a warning letter was sent by EC clarifying that there is a risk of recommitment if the N+3 rule goal is not achieved. However, as discussed earlier this goal will most probably be achieved.

Ms Lenoel explained that the warning letter was sent in October and this is a normal procedure. Regarding any possible measures in respect of the Covid-19 pandemic, Ms Lenoel mentioned that the funds of REACT-EU will also be available for Interreg Programmes. Nevertheless it is important to see in practice how this can be implemented.

Following the discussions, the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC) decides unanimously to approve as presented by the MA/JS:

- the 3rd Programme Revision
- the Technical Assistance Multiannual Budget Plan
- Annual Communication Plan for 2021
- The Managing Authority, the Albanian Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Joint Secretariat will draw an action plan based on the situation examined case by case regarding the inactive Albanian beneficiaries

At the end of JMC meeting, Brief Minutes and Decisions were drafted by the MA/JS and the Chairperson explained that they will be sent electronically to the members to comment before signed by the two Co-chairs.

**The Co-Chairpersons
of the Joint Monitoring Committee**

Chair

Co-Chair

Ms Mathilde Konstantopoulou

Advisor to the Special Secretary
for ERDF & CF
Hellenic Ministry of Development &
Investments

Mr Redih Lleshi

Director of Territorial Cooperation
Directorate
Albanian Ministry for Europe
and Foreign Affairs

Attachments:

1. Agenda of the 6th Joint Monitoring Committee Meeting
2. Participant's list of the 6th Joint Monitoring Committee Meeting