

Interreg



Co-funded by
the European Union

IPA Greece – Albania

INTERREG VI-A IPA GREECE-ALBANIA

1st MONITORING COMMITTEE MEETING

4 April 2023

**Venue: Hotel Du Lac
Ioannina, Greece**

Brief Minutes & Decisions

The Monitoring Committee (hereinafter referred to as MC) of the Interreg VI-A IPA Greece-Albania (hereinafter referred to as the Programme) convened for its 1st Monitoring Committee meeting on 4th April 2023 at Ioannina, Greece (Hotel Du Lac) following an invitation by the Hellenic Managing Authority Interreg 2021-2027 (hereinafter the “MA” in agreement with the co-chairs).

Mr Georgios Zervos, Special Secretary for ERDF & CF programmes, who chairs the Committee welcomed the participants on behalf of the Hellenic Ministry of Development and Investments and wished for a productive meeting. Mr Zervos stated that the Programme was approved in November 2022 and subsequently listed the three priority axes and cited the budget of the Programme. Mr Zervos added that the objective of the current programming period is to accelerate the processes of projects' approval and implementation in order to avoid unnecessary delays. In addition, fragmentation of the budget has to be avoided, in order to achieve the maximum added value of the programme's implementation.

The floor was passed to Ms Kjara Adhami, Director of Directorate for Administration of EU Financial Assistance of the State Agency for Strategic Programming and Aid Coordination (thereinafter “SASPAC”) who co-chaired the meeting. Ms Adhami also welcomed the participants and wished a successful start for the new Programme, along with a fruitful cooperation between the two participant countries. Ms Adhami also highlighted the fact that the widened new eligible area in Albania now contains one of the biggest counties (Fier Region) in the country and that this inclusion will pose further challenges.

The floor was passed to Ms Magali Lenoel, Programme Manager in the Unit D1 for Macro-regions, Transnational/Interregional/External Cooperation and Enlargement of the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) in the European Commission. Ms Lenoel presented Ms Nathalie Verschelde, Deputy Head of Unit D1 and informed the participants that colleagues from the EU Delegation in Albania will also join the meeting from Tirana. Ms Lenoel congratulated the participants and everyone involved on the adoption of the Programme in November 2022. Ms Lenoel added that the programme targets tackle issues of high importance for EU policies (namely climate change and connectivity). Ms Lenoel referred to the selection criteria for projects as a key element for the success of the Programme in order to select quality projects and foster cooperation in the cross-border region. In addition, according to Ms Lenoel the Programme will facilitate the networking amongst citizens, which is the starting point for encouraging cooperation between the two sides of Greece-Albania border. In that context, communication is a crucial factor towards the familiarisation of the citizens of the eligible area with the activities of the Programme. Ms Lenoel concluded by calling on the MC members to be actively engaged during the current implementation period and since partnership is a key element for the success of the Programme, the Interreg regulation requires a comprehensive partnership including not only public authorities but also Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) or economic and social partners even as non-voting

members. Ms Verschelde expressed her satisfaction for the presence of EC at the meeting and stated her particular interest in the Programme.

The Chair thanked the previous speakers for their interventions. The Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat (hereinafter “MA” / “JS” respectively) services assured the Chair that the quorum has been reached and the Chair declared the start of the works of the meeting. The Chair asked from all participants to sign the Declarations of Impartiality and Confidentiality and asked for the approval of the agenda. Mr Vasilis Charitantis, member of the Unit B of the MA asked for the rationale document for the Technical Assistance of the Programming Period 2021-2027 to be inserted as a new item in the agenda. The modification of the agenda was accepted and the amended agenda was therefore approved.

The floor was passed to Ms Maria Nezeriti, the Head of the Managing Authority of the “Interreg 2021-2027” who also welcomed the participants and passed the floor to Ms Eva Karagianni, Head of Unit A for Programming and Evaluation of the MA, who welcomed the participants and presented the Rules of Procedure (hereinafter “RoP”) for the MC. Following the presentation, Ms Verschelde suggested to the Albanian National Authority to ensure the NGOs involvement on the Albanian side, by stating that the principle of cooperation entails the appointment of NGOs. Ms Verschelde added the term ‘Certifying Authority’ is no more used in the Interreg Regulation and perhaps it has to be renamed¹. Furthermore, Ms Verschelde suggested that the references to DG REGIO should be renamed as references to the European Commission (EC). Mr Zervos clarified that the Certifying Authority of Greece is an established independent body, whose mandate is to submit the payments to the respective EC services for approval and its functioning fully abides with the EU Regulations.

Ms Adhami assured that the Albanian NA is willing for a further involvement of NGOs and that the reason for the careful approach about whom to appoint as non-voting member is that NGOs with a nationwide presence in Albania are also considered as potential partners in the Programme. Therefore a potential conflict of interest as well the risk for the exclusion of potential future beneficiaries should be avoided during the MC members’ appointment phase. Mr Zervos thanked Ms Adhami for the satisfying clarifications. Following Ms Verschelde’s intervention who recalled that a potential conflict of interest can affect any member of the MC (and not only representative of an NGO) and that rules are in place to deal with such potential conflicts of interests and Mr Zervos’ and Ms Adhami’s replies, the Rules of Procedure document was unanimously approved.

Ms Tesia, Coordinator for EU Programmes and Projects for the Region of Epirus welcomed the participants on behalf of the Regional Governor of Epirus with a special reference to the EC, the NA and the colleagues from the Region of Fier. Ms Tesia referred to the RoP documents, stating that the MC members were used to a stronger presence of Regional Authorities and added that

¹ see Article 47 Interreg Regulation which refers to the body performing the accounting function)

Interreg primarily concerns Regions whose role should not be set aside. More specifically, Ms Tesia expressed that (i) the word “consensus” should be included when it comes to decisions regarding financial issues and approval of projects (Article 7, paragraph 5 in the RoP document), (ii) that the termination of a subsidy contract should be approved by the MC after a proposal from MA/JS as stated in the Article 2, paragraph 9 of the RoP and (iii) that any relevant comments should be sent at least 3 days before the MC discussion.

Mr Zervos responded that the Chair could accept the two first points; nonetheless, the administrative burden in case all the approvals took place by the MC would be unbearable to handle, therefore the last point cannot be accepted.

Ms Tesia clarified that written procedure should be used for decisions and not for modifications and to that comment, Mr Zervos responded that the Chair accepts the request in that case.

The floor was passed to Ms Maria Nezeriti, Head of MA, who listed the remaining documents to be sent to the MC members and presented the structure of the new Programme.

The floor was passed to Ms Eva Karagianni, Head of Unit A, who presented the Internal Rules of Procedure of the Joint Secretariat (hereinafter referred as JS) of the new Programme, as well as the JS staffing procedure. Following the presentation, the Chair invited the MC members to approve the extension of the contract of the JS members to the new programming period. Ms Tesia expressed her agreement by underlining the productive collaboration with the JS members until now. The Chair consequently stated that the MC accepts the extension and that the Internal Rules of Procedure are unanimously approved.

The floor was passed to Ms Symi Passalidou, the newly appointed MA Communication Officer, who presented the Communication Strategy of the Programme. Mr Zervos thanked Ms Passalidou for the presentation and stated the communication strategy as approved.

The floor was passed to Mr Athanasios Vladikas (Unit A of the MA) who presented the evaluation criteria for the selection of the projects for the programming period 2021-2027, as well as the methodology and the amended version of the timetable of the planned calls for proposals, as formulated according to the discussions at the technical meeting between MA/JS, National Authorities and the EC that preceded the MC meeting. Mr Zervos commented that the calls' timetable is the main topic of the current MC meeting and opened the floor for remarks. Mr Tesia expressed the Region of Epirus' agreement with the timetable. Nonetheless, Ms Tesia remarked that when it comes to targeted calls the MA/JS should have the mandate to immediately start talks with potential beneficiaries. In addition, according to Ms Tesia some of the targets and the allocation of the budget amongst calls should be re-examined taking into consideration any particular needs of the Programme and beneficiaries. Mr Zervos agreed the MA should commence technical meetings with potential beneficiaries in order to continue the

planning of the calls. Ms Nezeriti clarified that the proposed budget of each call is an estimation and it can be re-considered during consultation phase.

Ms Vershelde (EC) demanded clarifications regarding the timing of the small-scale projects call(s), to which Mr Vladikas clarified that it is going to be later than the currently planned calls with the remaining budget.

Ms Vershelde asked about the practical details regarding the MC involvement at each stage of the projects assessment as envisaged by the rules of procedure, to which the MA clarified that the MA will propose the result for each appraisal stage and the MC consequently will take the decision. Ms Vershelde insisted on the point that the MC should be receive an adequate level of information about the appraisal details at each stage of the assessment. The MA clarified that the early phases of assessment will relieve the MC from enormous burden. Ms Vershelde underlined the need for more meetings than written procedures. Mr Fotiadis (Head of Unit B of the MA) clarified that all the necessary documents will be communicated to the MC in a timely manner and that there will be a consultation between the MC and MA at each stage.

Ms Vershelde referred to the European Court of Auditors (hereinafter CoA) special report² on Interreg, which audited 23 programmes. According to Ms Vershelde, even though the outcome of the CoA report was positive for Interreg, the CoA highlighted the need for increased cross-border dimension in the projects and advised against the so-called “mirror projects”. Therefore, Ms Vershelde expressed her delight about the inclusion of the CBC criteria both at eligibility and at quality check; nonetheless, Ms Vershelde underlined the need for a threshold of a minimum of 5 or 6 points (out of 10) in the CBC criteria section for a project to be approved for the next assessment phase. Finally, Ms Vershelde expressed her strong concerns about the decision to organise only one common call for proposals (in addition to the call for strategic projects and small scale projects) for a relatively large budget that could potentially jeopardise the participation of beneficiaries that might not be ready at the time of the call. Ms Vershelde pleaded the MA not to select projects of inferior quality only to exhaust the budget of the Programme early. Ms Vershelde concluded by asking the MA to seriously consider organising another common call for proposals in case the quality is not deemed sufficient in the common call for proposals.

Mr Zervos assured the EC (i) that the Ministry's target is indeed the CBC aspect of the Programme via mutual actions (ii) that if a project scores low on the CBC aspect, it should not be approved. Mr Zervos added that the current calls' planning is based on lessons learnt from the 2014-2020 Programme and that the MA decided to follow a frontloaded approach to the financing of projects, in order to obtain the prompt activation of the Programme. In any

²Special Report 14/2021: Interreg cooperation: The potential of the European Union's cross-border regions has not yet been fully unlocked

case if there is unspent budget, following the common call for proposals (due to low quality of proposals), a new common call will be launched.

Ms Verschelde expressed her agreement to the lessons learnt approach, however stressed on the need for a balance between the need to activate the Programme as soon as possible and the margin for flexibility at a later stage of the Programme i.e. beneficiaries to have access to financing more than once and the quality of the projects to improve in the course of the implementation of the Programme through the organisation of an additional general call if a need relevant to the aforementioned situation arises. The Chair thanked the EC for the comments and considered the timetable of the planned calls for proposals and the evaluation criteria as approved by the MC.

Ms Konstantopoulou, Advisor to the Special Secretary of ERDF & CF programmes conveyed an intervention from the Certifying Authority, which read as below: "The Certifying Authority has the accounting function according to art 47 from the EU Regulation 2021/1059 (Interreg Regulation). So, the title of this Authority remains as such, as we are still the Certifying Authority for the programming period 2014-2020 as well as for the new programming period 2021-2027. This is why in the RoP the term Certifying Authority should be kept as such." The Chair highlighted the high quality of the work done by the Certifying Authority.

Mr Charitantis informed the MC members of the Technical Meeting between the MA/JS, the Greek and Albanian NA and the representatives from the European Commission and the National Coordination Authority, that preceded the MC meetings on the same day and he presented the tentative allocation of the Technical Assistance funds. Mr Charitantis mentioned that the delegations from the two countries discussed and agreed on the relative distribution of the total budget of the TA between the Programme Management (Greece) and Albania and that the Albanian NA will inform the MA on the finalised total amounts per each budget line concerning the Albanian TA. The Chair asked from the MC members to approve the decisions taken in the Technical Meeting on the Technical Assistance; the decision was ratified.

Ms Konstantopoulou invited the participants to watch a video regarding the project G.A.M.E.S., which the participants were invited to visit in person on the following morning, along with the project G.A.T.E.

Following the last presentation, the Chair terminated the meeting by thanking the participants.

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

- The Monitoring Committee Rules of Procedure
- The Internal Rules of Procedure of the Joint Secretariat and the JS the extension of the contracts of the JS members to the new programming period
- the evaluation criteria for the selection of projects, the respective methodology and the Calls for proposals timetable
- The allocation of the Technical Assistance total funds between the Programme Management – Greece (2.148.000,00€) and Albania (1.183.251,00€).

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

Chair

Co-Chair

Mr Georgios Zervos

Special Secretary
for ERDF & CF
Hellenic Ministry of Development &
Investments

Ms Kjara Adhami

Director of Directorate for
Administration of EU Financial
Assistance of SASPAC
Ministry for Europe
and Foreign Affairs

Attachments:

1. Agenda of the 1st Monitoring Committee Meeting
2. Participant's list of the 1st Monitoring Committee Meeting