Evaluation Plan

Interreg VI-B NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme

DECEMBER 2023

At the time of writing the current EvalPlan the Programme is under revision to accommodate the additional allocation received in 2023 and the participation of Armenia, which did not send the written agreement to the contents of the programme in due time to be taken into account for the first programme submission. The programme version taken into account in this plan is the revised version submitted to the European Commission on 15th of November, 2023, therefore the EvalPlan, although submitted to the MC in line with the deadline in the regulations, may only be approved by the MC after the revised programme is approved.

CONTENTS

A. OBJECTIVES, COVERAGE AND COORDINATION

1. PROGRAMME LEVEL EVALUATION

Evaluation of Interreg VI-B NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme (further on referred to as the Programme) aims at assessing both the performance and effects of the Programme. The evaluation criteria related to effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence are expected to be covered. As well, the impact, sustainability, EU added value and visibility of the programme and its contribution to the EU strategic goals and priorities are aimed at a later stage.

The current EvalPlan sets out an evaluation strategy for the entire implementation period of the programme. The drafting process took into account the provisions of the applicable EU regulations (Interreg Regulation – no. 1059/2021, Common Provisions Regulation – no. 1060/2021, ERDF-CF Regulation – no. 1058/2021, NDICI Regulation – no. 947/2021) and Better Regulation Guidance[1], followed closely the Staff Working Document on performance, monitoring and evaluation issued by the European Commission[2] and also took into account the Guide for Drafting the Evaluation Plans of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy in Romania[3] developed under the service agreement to improve monitoring and evaluation capacity in the context of EU-funded programs in Romania (2021-2027) signed between MEIP and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. As well, the feedback received from the EC Evaluation Helpdesk on the previous generation of evaluation plans drafted by the Evaluation Unit was also used in selecting the types of information to be included in this plan.

Abbreviations and glossary of terms

MA	Managing Authority which is responsible for managing the programme with a view to delivering the objectives of the programme
NAs	The National Authorities are the counterparts of the Managing Authority, responsible for the coordination of the programme management in the participating countries.
MC	Monitoring Committee. Overall monitoring of the Programme implementation lies within the competencies of the MC. MC shall examine the progress made in carrying out evaluations, syntheses of evaluations and any follow-up given to findings. MC shall approve the EvalPlan and any amendment thereto, as well as Programme evaluation reports.
JS	Joint Secretariat. It assists the MA and the MC in carrying out their respective functions. The joint secretariat shall also provide information to potential beneficiaries about funding opportunities under Interreg programmes and shall assist beneficiaries and partners in the implementation of operations.

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[1]   https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-making-process/planning-and-proposing-law/better-regulation/better-regulation-guidelines-and-toolbox_en

[2] The Staff Working Document on performance, monitoring and evaluation of the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the Just Transition Fund in 2021-2027 – EC website

[3] https://www.evaluare-structurale.ro/en/web/guest/resurse-metodologice - Guide

MA Unit	Unit MA Black Sea Basin within MDPWA/ Directorate General European Territorial Cooperation/ Directorate MA for European Territorial Cooperation Programmes in charge with managing the Programme
Evaluation Unit	Evaluation Unit within MDPWA/ Directorate General European Territorial Cooperation/ Directorate MA for European Territorial Cooperation Programmes ensuring the evaluation function for the Interreg programmes
MDPWA	The Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration in Romania, hosting the MA for the Interreg programmes, including Interreg VI-B NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme.
MEIP	The Ministry of European Investment and Projects in Romania. Institution coordinating the management of EU funds in Romania, in which ECU is located.
ECU	Evaluation Central Unit. Unit within MEIP which plays a central role in the overall evaluation set-up of EU funds in Romania.
Interreg funds	The ERDF and the external financing instruments of the Union that support the Interreg Programmes (in this case, both NDICI and IPA)
ERDF	The European Regional Development Fund. In line with Regulation (EU) no. 1058/2021, the ERDF shall contribute to reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions within the Union, and to reducing the backwardness of the least favoured regions through participation in the structural adjustment of regions whose development is lagging behind and in the conversion of declining industrial regions, including by promoting sustainable development and addressing environmental challenges
NDICI	The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe. With its general objectives established in Regulation (EU) no. 947/2021, the instrument also supports Interreg programmes involving countries in the neighbourhood area.
IPA III	The Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance. With its general objective established in Regulation (EU) no. 1529/2021, the instrument also supports Interreg programmes involving IPA countries
CBC	Cross-border cooperation
EvalPlan	Evaluation Plan. The EvalPlan is an instrument for planning the evaluation activities for the whole programming period, which is approved by MC. Its role is to improve the quality of evaluations carried out during the programming period. The ToR are drafted starting from the provisions of the EvalPlan.
ToR	Terms of Reference. A written document presenting the scope of the evaluation, the key questions, the indicative methods to be used, the resources, schedule and reporting requirements.
TA	Technical assistance
Effectiveness	How successful EU action has been in achieving or progressing towards its objectives, looking for evidence of why, whether or how the changes are linked to the EU intervention
Efficiency	The costs and benefits of the EU intervention as they accrue to different stakeholders, identifying what factors are driving these costs/benefits and

	how these factors relate to the EU intervention, depending on data availability; otherwise, qualitative analysis may concentrate on the identification of inefficiencies
Relevance	How well the objectives of the EU intervention being evaluated (still) match the (current) needs and problems
Coherence	How well the intervention works internally and with other EU interventions
EU added value	The value resulting from EU interventions that is additional to the value that would have resulted from interventions initiated at regional or national levels
Visibility	How the communication activities of the programme make the EU policy visible to the interested population and appraise the public awareness of the EU financial and policy effort
Impact	The changes associated with a particular intervention which occur over the longer term
Sustainability	Whether the benefits of a project or programme are likely to continue after its finalisation

2. ROLE AND MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION PLAN

The EvalPlan represents a practical management tool for the implementation of the Programme by providing the framework for the implementation of quality evaluations to be used effectively by MA, in order to contribute to the implementation of an evidence-based programme. As well, the generated findings can become roots for setting the elements for the next programming period.

The **objectives** of this EvalPlan are:

- to ensure the quality of the first evaluations during the programming period carried out under MA's responsibility, through proper planning and agreed procedural steps;
- to facilitate informed programme management and policy decisions aiming at improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the Programme and at streamlining the next programming period;
- to set the guiding framework for the impact evaluation of the Programme;
- to ensure the proportionality with the financial allocation of the Programme and the practicality in terms of alignment with the expected evolution of the Programme.

In addition, the EvalPlan ensures that the evaluation criteria mentioned in the regulations are taken into account to the widest possible extent while performing the evaluations of the Programme, in line with art. 35(1) of the Interreg Regulation.

Formal arrangements

The EvalPlan is submitted for approval to the MC within one year from the adoption of the Programme, in line with art. 35(6) of the Interreg Regulation.
The EvalPlan may be later amended in line with the evolution of the Programme, amendments being subject to MC decisions.
In case of emerging needs, additional ad-hoc evaluations to the ones clearly indicated in the EvalPlan may be carried out.

3. COVERAGE AND RATIONALE

This EvalPlan covers Interreg VI-B NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme for the entire programming period, taking into account that the impact evaluation has to be completed by 30 June 2029 according to art. 35(2) of the Interreg Regulation.

The Programme is funded by NDICI, ERDF and IPA III (total Interreg funds of 85,010,556 euro) as well as match-funding from the participating countries, adding up to a total budget of 94,456,173 euro and was first approved by the European Commission in December 2022.

The performance framework overview table of the Programme, which correlates the types of actions, the estimated budget, the output and result indicators and the intervention fields, by specific objective, is available on the [Programme's website](#).

Analysis as regards a shared Evaluation Plan

Besides Interreg VI-B NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme, which is a transnational Interreg programme, MDPWA is MA for two external cross-border Interreg NEXT programmes (Interreg VI-A NEXT Romania-Republic of Moldova Programme, Interreg VI-A NEXT Romania-Ukraine Programme), one IPA CBC Programe (Interreg IPA Romania-Serbia Programme) and two internal cross-border Interreg programmes (Interreg VI-A Romania–Bulgaria Programme, Interreg VI-A Romania-Hungary Programme).

The territorial coverage of the Interreg Programmes that Romania hosts the Managing Authority for during 2021-2027 is all around the country borders, covering NUTS III and NUTS II regions from a variety of countries – EU member states, candidate and neighbouring countries. Three of the six counties in Romania covered by the Programme are shared with other three cross-border Interreg programmes. However, this represents a very small share of the Programme's eligible area and could not form a solid base for a common evaluation strategy. Therefore, a common Evaluation Plan for more Interreg programmes that would also cover the Black Sea Basin Programme could not be put into practice.

4. ANALYSIS OF RELEVANT EVIDENCE

The first step in designing the future is learning from the past.

In order to root the evaluation of the future programme in the available evidence, the direct sources of information on the previous programming period that contain evaluation-related useful evidence have been analysed and are detailed below.

From the available information, the programme demonstrates reactiveness during implementation and integration of the lessons learnt from the previous programming period, which are regarded as an indicator that the findings of future evaluations will also serve in practice in the decision-making process.

General observation

The previous Black Sea Basin CBC programmes were not subject to evaluation by the programme structures, so this represents the first evaluation exercise of such type.

However, programme-targeted evaluations were performed for the ERDF and IPA CBC programmes that Romania acted as Managing Authority for. In addition to these, the Interreg programmes in Romania were also covered by overarching evaluations carried out at Partnership Agreement level. As experience has shown, although evaluation usually brings valuable findings, these findings often come too late or are based on the information available up to a cut-off date that is well back in time. In some cases, especially as regards the financial data and indicators' targets, at the time the recommendations are issued, the bodies of the respective programme

Annual reports for the 2014-2020 Programme

The annual reports prepared by the programme (technical part) and the annual monitoring and evaluation plans do not point out to any major holdbacks in implementation. According to the information presented in 2021 and 2022, both JTS and MA staff were involved in day-by day monitoring of the projects, by providing continuous support to beneficiaries and following closely the projections for the achievement of the output indicators' target values. The Programme area being affected by the unprovoked and unjustified military aggression of Russia against Ukraine, MA and JTS staff also worked closely with the National Authority and the beneficiaries from Ukraine and their project partners in identifying the most suitable and efficient solutions for the projects in order to overcome or reduce the effects.

Overall, the information in the annual reports and related annual monitoring and evaluation plans shows the constant commitment of the programme bodies towards the smooth implementation of the programme, simplification and reaching a high use of funds (including by temporarily transferring resources from TA to allow contracting from the reserve list), rooted on a permanent dialogue and communication among MA, NAs, JTS and beneficiaries.

2014-2020 Programme evaluations

Performing programme evaluations by the managing authorities was not mandatory for the 2014-2020 ENI CBC programmes. However, an EC result-oriented monitoring (ROM) mission took place. The **ROM Report** at programme level which was issued in 2019 found the ENI CBC programme to have high relevance, successfully addressing the needs of the target groups and beneficiaries across the eight participating countries. The implementation mechanism was found to be functioning generally well, programme outputs being likely to be of satisfactory quality, but with some reasons for concern. The quality of know-how development and its transfer to target groups beyond the project were found to be essential for the effectiveness of the programme. Communication efforts were also found to be effective.

In 2021, the programme also carried a **ROM pilot exercise**, at project level. MA drafted a methodology and piloted it on a number of 6 projects contracted under the first call for proposals. The main conclusions extracted from the ROM reports of the concerned projects were that the projects were relevant to the needs of the concerned target groups, that the implementation mechanisms are functional, creating proper framework for an efficient implementation of projects, that there is a satisfactory level of achievement of the objectives, outputs (including their quality) and deliverables and there is potential for these to produce multiplier effects, in spite of the difficulties in implementation caused by the COVID 19 pandemic, which in some cases challenged the project efficiency and that project partners created the context to ensure the sustainability of project results. Following the ROM exercise, the MA representatives concluded that the main findings and conclusions on the concerned ROM criteria were to a large extent covered by the monitoring officers in their regular monitoring activity. It was also agreed to properly tackle the key aspects related to relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and horizontal issues during monitoring and reflect them in monitoring reports, if appropriate.

Other evaluations

At EU level, the **special report** of the European Court of Auditors on EU support to cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries[4] issues in December 2022 concluded that the 2014-2020 EU-funded programmes have provided relevant and valuable support to the regions on both sides of the EU's external borders. However, the programmes suffered from significant delays at the start of their implementation, so it was too early to assess their overall effectiveness. In addition, the programmes were found to contain weaknesses in monitoring and reporting on results.

The Joint EEAS-DG NEAR document containing the **Mid-term review** on ENI CBC Programmes[5] issued in 2018 also showed that the preparatory phase of CBC has been slower than anticipated. However, ENI CBC programmes were found to be in a better position compared

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[4] https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?did=62741

[5] https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/eni-cbc-programme-mid-term-review-2017_en

to their predecessors to demonstrate their achievements by using better designed output and result indicators in more focused fields of intervention. The management procedures seemed to be carried out much faster and in a more coordinated way than in the previous programming period thanks to the improvements in the regulatory framework and the efforts of programme bodies. Nevertheless, it was too early to assess any increase in the capacity of the Managing Authority or the applicants in the implementation phase.

The **Overview of mid-term evaluations and recommendations** in ENI CBC programmes[6] developed by the TESIM project in September 2021 points to recommendations related to the capacity building for the project beneficiaries (on communication, electronic monitoring system, horizontal issues, also by providing information on the common mistakes, lessons learned, and best practices). The performed evaluations also included the performance of the programme bodies (which was generally seen as efficient and effective), communication and reaching the target values of the output and result indicators. Looking at the recommendations for the future programmes, current BSB Programme checks the boxes as regards the timely programming process and a quick start of the programme implementation to avoid delays, concentration and focus, combination of types of projects, improvement of practices and procedures.

The Overview also provides in Annex 1 a list of aspects to be taken into account when planning future programme evaluations and which were also reviewed and observed in drafting the current EvalPlan. The aspects presented in the list are related to evaluation timing, clarity of objective, evaluation questions, availability of data, non-limitation of evaluation tools and methods, unintended effects, evaluation scope and deliverables.

Policy context

Policy wise, thinking about the overall aims of the three funds that feed into the allocation for this Programme, **NDICI** aims to uphold and promote the Union's values, principles and fundamental interests worldwide in order to pursue the objectives and principles of the Union's external action, the **ERDF** aims to contribute to the objective of strengthening the economic, social and territorial cohesion and to reducing disparities between the level of development of the various regions and **IPA III** aims to support the IPA beneficiaries in adopting and implementing the political, institutional, legal, administrative, social and economic reforms required to comply with Union values and to progressively align to Union rules, standards, policies and practices with a view to future Union membership, thereby contributing to mutual stability, security, peace and prosperity. At the same time, the aim of the **transnational programmes** is more targeted in the regulations, as they are listed to aim achieving a higher degree of territorial integration. However, from the **NDICI perspective**, these programmes offer strategically important and meaningful frameworks for deepening relations with and among partner countries, based on the principles of mutual accountability, shared ownership and responsibility.

The type of programme and its financial size as compared to the vast eligible area - translated in practice in a limited number of projects with an expected maximum EU allocation for each regular project of 1.5 mil. euro (and average of 0.75 mil. euro) split between 4-6 project partners and for small scale projects of 0.5 mil. euro (and average of 0.3 mil. euro) split between 3-4 project partners - represent significant constraints for the programme to be able to bring a sizeable contribution to developing and enhancing research and innovation capacities, promoting climate change adaptation and disaster risk prevention or enhancing protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity and green infrastructure, supporting the capacity building of public authorities and stakeholders if they are regarded and evaluated from the perspective of the changes that take place at policy level. In this context, a more suitable approach for this programme would be to perform the impact evaluation from the NDICI perspective presented above.

Continuity of interventions

Given the limited impact that may be reached in the thematic fields, a relevant background factor for increased impact could have been the continuation of financing from the previous programming period. However, by analysing comparatively the priorities in the two

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[6] https://tesim-enicbc.eu/download/mid-term-evaluations-in-eni-cbc-programmes/

programming periods and the related indicative type of actions it was concluded that the 2021-2027 interventions cannot be widely regarded as an actual continuation of interventions from the 2014-2020 ones. Even in developing the Performance Framework Methodology the financial size of the projects was established globally at programme level, not split by thematic areas, pointing to no perfect thematic continuation.

Therefore, previous 2014-2020 interventions and projects cannot be taken fully into account in designing the coverage and logic for the impact evaluation. However, some results of the previous programmes may be considered at the time the evaluation takes place.

Additional relevant information on the programming document for 2021-2027

In search of the major trends that could translate into future evaluation questions, the analysis of the 2021-2027 programming document showed heterogeneity among the participating countries and territories, in both political and economic terms, significant environmental concerns, the importance of Blue Economy for the region, focus on complementarity with other frameworks and funding instruments, programme design in line with the goals of the main strategies concerning the programme area - Black Sea Synergy (BSS), Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea (CMA) and its scientific pillar - the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda for the Black Sea (SRIA), EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), consideration of the core principles of the New Bauhaus Initiative and commitment to horizontal principles (sustainable development, DNSH - "do no significant harm", equal opportunities and non-discrimination, equality between men and women).

5. COORDINATION MECHANISMS

In Romania, ECU, as part of MEIP, plays a central role in the overall evaluation set-up of EU funds and is in charge of both Partnership Agreement-level evaluation and ensuring the methodological coordination of the overall evaluation process and promoting capacity building at system level. At a higher level, the Coordination Committee established for the Partnership Agreement approves Evaluation Plans for national programmes, while also supervising the use of evaluation results.

In addition, the National Evaluation Working Group, also leaded by ECU, plays an active role in coordinating methodological efforts at national level. The group gathers representatives of all MAs' evaluation units, including the Evaluation Unit, which ensures the evaluation function for the Interreg programmes that Romania acts as Managing Authority for. The undertaken coordination efforts are key in creating consistent practices across the system and in sharing good evaluation practices, as well as providing the means and the place to both give and receive adequate guidance and support on evaluation matters.

In Armenia, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Ukraine, Republic of Moldova and Georgia the responsibility for the evaluation activities as regards the Programme rests with the NAs, which at their turn consult the relevant bodies which need to be involved for a particular evaluation. The input is submitted by the NAs directly to the MA or as part of the MC activity.

The NAs are responsible with ensuring the evaluation related activities on the territory of the participating states, in coordination with MA, in supervising / coordinating the implementation of recommendations deriving from the evaluations (follow-up to the recommendations) on the territory of the participating states and in supporting the MA in taking the evaluation results into account in the next programming process.

As regards the coordination mechanisms established at EU level, the information received by MEIP by taking part in DG Regio's Evaluation Network is shared with the relevant national actors, including the Evaluation Unit.

In addition, Interact is playing an important role in favouring the exchange of knowledge and best practices between the Interreg programmes, by organizing periodical events focused on evaluation themes, organizing online courses, developing and upkeeping an online library with all presentations and briefing documents and by hosting a platform on results and evaluation for posting updates and having dialogues on various evaluation topics. TESIM support is also highly valuable in facilitating the transfer of know-how and the exchange of

information amongst Interreg NEXT programmes, especially by facilitating the regular meetings of the active monitoring and evaluation network.

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1. THE EVALUATION FUNCTION

The evaluation function for the Programme is ensured by the Evaluation Unit, which supports the MA in its responsibilities connected to programme evaluation.

The evaluation activity is linked to monitoring and audit activities, but there is a strong distinction between these processes. Monitoring measures the performance of a programme, but does not assess its quality, effectiveness and impact, as evaluation does. Audit verifies the compliance of an implementation system with the existing rules, but does not appraise the influence of the implementation on the final effects, as evaluation does. As audit and monitoring cannot be confused with evaluation, evaluation is not to be used for audit or monitoring purposes. These different instruments all contribute to the effective management of the Interreg funds and reciprocally integrate their findings, but each of them covers a specific area of investigation and pursues different objectives.

According to the European Commission in the Staff Working Document on performance, monitoring and evaluation, the task of programme evaluation is to assess the effects of the programmes, in a wider context, as performance judgment cannot be made purely on indicator achievement values (indicators measure 'what', but do not explain 'why'). Evaluations should be an essential part of the life cycle of a programme. They are intended to increase knowledge of what works and what does not and in which context in order for decision makers and other stakeholders to make timely decisions to support the implementation of programmes and to draw conclusions for policy making.

Institutional details

The Evaluation Unit is located within the General Directorate for European Territorial Cooperation, Directorate MA ETC Programmes, within the MDPWA. Its staff is functionally independent of the staff of the units within the Directorate that perform the functions of MA for each Interreg programme that Romania acts as MA for, as well as of the staff of the other structures within the General Directorate involved in the connected processes and functions (e.g. accounting function, MA and NA for the other Interreg programmes, monitoring, authorisation, electronic monitoring system, payments, irregularities, first level control). Therefore, the implementation of the Programme and the evaluation of the Programme are located within the same organisation but are assigned to different units, ensuring independence and impartiality. The Evaluation Unit is directly subordinated to the Director of MA ETC Programmes and its activity includes regular workflows with the other units within the General Directorate and other supporting departments within the ministry. The decision-making process follows the internal procedural rules established at ministry level, the documents being approved by respecting all hierarchical necessary steps. As well, the Evaluation Unit acts as the main Interreg counterpart for ECU in all aspects related to evaluation, participating in working groups, meetings and any other related trainings.

The Evaluation Unit currently consists of three full-time positions. The staff of the Evaluation Unit has deep Interreg knowledge and carries out various horizontal tasks as well, having an overview of the programming and implementation of the Interreg programmes in Romania. As regards evaluation-related tasks, the three evaluation officers are partly working for Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin Programme and partly for the other Interreg programmes that Romania participates in.

To ensure the sustainability of programme evaluation activity, the evaluation officers make use of the common Interreg virtual workspace where all important information is stored electronically. As well, all internal procedures are followed, as regards both processes (e.g. archiving, risks, anti-fraud, security of IT systems, data recovery in case of disaster) and

human resources (e.g. annual evaluation of staff, workload analysis, training plan, substitution plan, programming of annual leaves to ensure continuity).

Evaluation Unit's responsibilities directly related to the evaluation function are detailed in Annex E.

2. THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Regulatory requirements

According to the regulations, programme evaluations may address one or more of the following criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and EU added value with the aim to improve the quality of the design and implementation of programmes. Evaluations may also cover other relevant criteria, such as inclusiveness, non-discrimination and visibility, and may cover more than one programme. Other criteria relating to the needs of programmes may be addressed.

In addition, an evaluation for each programme to assess its impact is to be carried out by 30 June 2029.

All evaluations are published on the Programme's website.

The regulatory provisions require MA to draw up the current EvalPlan which is approved by the MC, as well as any amendment thereto. The MC also examines the progress made in carrying out evaluations, syntheses of evaluations and any follow-up given to findings.

Involved bodies

The evaluation process is led by the MA through the Evaluation Unit. Evaluations commissioned to external experts are commissioned, monitored and supervised by the Evaluation Unit. The evaluation officers within the Evaluation Unit may also carry out certain studies or evaluations, if deemed necessary during the implementation process.

The MA/Evaluation Unit is also in charge with drafting all preparatory documents for commissioning or carrying out Programme evaluations.

Monitoring Committee

In line with the regulations, the functions of the MC as regards evaluation are to approve the current EvalPlan and any other subsequent amendments to it and to examine the progress in carrying out evaluations, syntheses of evaluations and any follow-up given to findings.

To apply the European Code of Conduct on Partnership[7] to the highest extent, for this Programme the MC is also the consultation and decision forum for Programme's evaluation reports.

Therefore, the following **functions** related to evaluation are performed:

- partnership function - to ensure representation and consultation of the key actors in the transnational programme in planning and implementing the Programme evaluations;

- ownership function – to involve the key actors in the transnational programme from the design phase and ensure both that they are aware of the evaluation results and of any measures that need to be taken and that they may make proposals and comments in all key stages;

- operational function - to approve the EvalPlan, inception reports and final evaluation reports.

To sum up, the MC is consulted in the following indicative **stages**:

a. Evaluation Planning

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[7] Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 240/2014 of 7 January 2014 on the European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds

- Consultation and approval of the EvalPlan and any formal amendments to it;

  b. Evaluation Management

- Consultation and approval of the inception report (for evaluations commissioned externally);

- Consultation on draft evaluation reports;

- Consultation and approval of the final evaluation reports, based on the quality grid previously filled in by the MA/Evaluation Unit;

  c. Use of evaluation results

- Information and analysis of the response to the evaluation recommendations proposed by MA and of the implementation status of accepted recommendations.

The division of responsibilities between the MA/Evaluation Unit and the MC, in relation to programme evaluation is presented in Section B.3 – Involvement of stakeholders.

Evaluation Central Unit

ECU provides the Evaluation Unit both guidance and the relevant information received as part of the Evaluation Network coordinated by the European Commission. The EvalPlan approved by the MC is also sent to ECU for information, as well as the final evaluation reports.

3. INVOLVEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS

A first set of evaluation questions resulted from the analysis of the available evidence presented in Section A.4 and enriched based on previous experience was consulted with the relevant programme structures and MC members and posted on the Programme's website and social media, resulting in a final set of questions included in Section C.2 - Fiches of the planned evaluations. The additional aspects and questions collected during this consultation process are presented in Annex D. All the themes proposed are treated under the wider evaluation questions included in this plan.

In line with article 15 of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership, MA also involves the relevant partners in the evaluation of the Programme within the framework of the MC, where the EvalPlan, inception reports and evaluation reports are consulted and approved.

The responsibilities in relation to programme evaluation are divided between the MA/Evaluation Unit and the MC (as forum for the involvement of stakeholders) as follows:

Tasks	MA/Evaluation Unit	MC
1. EvalPlan	Responsible for drafting and implementing Ensures MC consultation	May submit proposals during the consultation process Approves the plan
2. Drafting all preparatory documents for commissioning or carrying out Programme evaluations and ensuring their implementation	Responsible for drafting and implementing	-
3. Draft and final evaluation reports (and Inception Report for	Assesses the quality of the evaluation reports and process based on the pre-established checklists	Is consulted on evaluation reports and approves inception/final evaluation reports, on the basis of the

evaluations commissioned externally)		recommendations made by MA/Evaluation Unit May make proposals on the response to evaluation recommendations
4. Management of the evaluation	Direct contact point for programme evaluations, procurement and contract management for evaluations commissioned externally	-
5. Follow-up	Tracks the progress made; MA uses a follow-up table to monitor the progress achieved in implementing the agreed evaluation recommendations	Is informed by MA on the progress achieved in implementing agreed evaluation recommendations

In addition, stakeholders and project partners are involved in the evaluation of the Programme as part of the data collection process that takes place for each evaluation exercise, the reports being drafted taking into consideration their perception, opinions and suggestions.

4. THE SOURCE OF EVALUATION EXPERTISE

Given the fact that the evaluation function is ensured by the three evaluation officers within the Evaluation Unit for six Interreg programmes, the evaluations carried out for the Programme shall be, as a general rule, commissioned to external experts following internal procedures and the public procurement applicable rules.

The team of evaluators should preferably combine different experiences and skills: knowledge and experience in ETC/Interreg programmes; knowledge and experience in monitoring and measuring of regional development (for impact evaluations), knowledge and experience in data collection and visualization methodologies, knowledge and experience in stakeholder management.

In order to ensure the impartiality and functional independence of the evaluators and to minimise the risk of biased opinions or any unwanted interferences, the following measures are taken:

- inclusion in the ToR of provisions to ensure the independence of the evaluators (e.g. not MC members or observers, not having been involved in programming, in the calls for proposals, in the management of projects financed under the programme (depending on the type of evaluation);
- setting out clear award criteria and quality requirements;
- wide advertising of the public procurement procedure (including website and social media platforms);
- appointing a selection committee responsible for evaluating the bids against the criteria set out in the ToR, in line with applicable public procurement rules; the selection of the evaluators as part of a selection committee is performed, as a general rule, by different persons than the ones who drafted the ToR and are in charge of evaluation contract management;
- requesting signed declarations of impartiality and objectivity from the key experts and team leader to prevent any conflict of interest;
- as a general rule, performing of contract management not by the staff of the MA Unit, but by the evaluation officers in the Evaluation Unit, who are functionally

independent from the other functions performed by MA, as regards both programming and implementation;

- carrying out any evaluations performed internally, if any, by the evaluation officers in the Evaluation Unit, who are functionally independent from the other functions performed by MA.

5. TRAINING PROGRAMMES FOR STAFF DEALING WITH EVALUATION

Capacity building activities for the MA staff dealing with evaluation may refer to:

- self-study of evaluation plans, ToRs and reports, especially for the Interreg strands/programmes;
- self-study of published papers, guidelines and handbooks on programme evaluations;
- participating in online learning platforms/communities/groups related to programme evaluations;
- seminars on planning and managing evaluations, quality controlling of the evaluation reports;
- workshops on qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods and methods for impact assessment;
- meetings of the Evaluation Working Group, which allow exchange of information and good practices with other MAs, and meetings of the Evaluation Network in Romania, which allow wide exchange of ideas between the supply and demand sides;
- on-the job coaching;
- Interact and TESIM events on evaluation and wider related topics, which allow exchange of information and good practices with other Interreg/Interreg NEXT programmes.

Such capacity building activities are not budgeted separately in the current EvalPlan and should they entail participation costs for MA, these would be covered as part of the Programme's TA activities on a case by case basis, following internal administrative procedures. For the Evaluation Unit staff any such costs are expected to be also covered from other sources, since the evaluation function is carried for five other Interreg programmes.

6. STRATEGY TO ENSURE USE AND COMMUNICATION OF EVALUATIONS

Dissemination of the evaluation reports

Final evaluation reports shall be distributed to MC members, NAs, EC, MA, JS and ECU. According to the regulations, they shall also be published on the Programme website.

Evaluation results are integrated into the Programme's structures' day-to-day work (including information and communication wise), posted on social media, used whenever relevant during technical or higher-level meetings and events.

In order to facilitate the dissemination of evaluation results in a user-friendly format, evaluators will be required to deliver, together with the final evaluation reports, eye-catching one-pagers and info graphics, as well as project stories and testimonials, in order to facilitate their presentation to decision-makers and their use in future communication activities related to the Programme.

Follow-up and monitoring of evaluation recommendations

Evaluation recommendations may be accepted, marked as already implemented at the time they were proposed, rejected or deferred for later consideration (e.g. taken into account

for the next programming period). In order to ensure practical use of evaluation results, where a specific course of action is decided for an evaluation recommendation, the MA will monitor the progress achieved in its implementation, by using a follow-up table. The status shall be reported by MA to the MC whenever there is significant progress or upon previous request by an MC member.

In order to support the programme bodies in implementing the recommendations, but also to ensure that the recommendations made are of practical nature, tentative action plans for implementing each recommendation are also to be requested from the evaluation teams.

7. OVERALL BUDGET FOR IMPLEMENTING THE EVALUATION PLAN

The overall budget for implementing the current EvalPlan, covering the external resources used, is 170.000 euro, split as follows:

- 70.000 euro for the implementation evaluation, including communication
- 100.000 euro for the impact evaluation, including communication.

The above-mentioned budget should cover all evaluation related external activities, including any necessary data collection, translation or interpretation, travelling.

The external resources used are backed up by the programme bodies' internal resources (mainly staff), required for coordinating evaluations, collecting programme data, supporting external evaluators, decision-making, follow-up measures and dissemination and use of results. Any specific related costs are covered as part of the Programme's TA activities.

Main activities	Timing	Estimated cost	Financial sources
Data collection	Continuous collection: After calls for proposals are closed After project selection/contracting After the finalization of projects	internal resources (mostly staff costs)	included under MA/JS TA activities
Evaluation reports	November 2025-July 2026 March-November 2028	external resources – 170.000 euro	TA – external services
Dissemination of results and events	After performed evaluations	internal resources (mostly staff costs)	included under MA/NAs/JS TA activities
Capacity building initiatives	Continuously during the programming period	internal resources	included under MA/NAs/JS TA activities

8. QUALITY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Quality assurance in implementing the current EvalPlan is a process integrated in all related steps:

1. Evaluation timing

   The timing of the evaluations is planned in line with the expected evolution of the programme, so that evaluations are performed early enough to provide information

to feed the decision-making process, but late enough in the programming period to benefit from a sound evaluation basis.

Timings may be adjusted in line with the actual evolution of the Programme.

2. Drafting the ToR

Ensuring quality will start with drafting the ToR in a clear manner which provides the potential bidders with the necessary information to draw up the offer, based on previous adequate planning. Clear award criteria and quality requirements are set. The ToR will be verified against the checklist in Annex A - Checklist for assessing the Terms of References. This checklist is designed to verify the pertinence of the ToR and the inclusion of all the needed items. It will be used by the Evaluation Unit while drafting the ToR to make sure that all necessary elements are included.

3. Selection of evaluators

Following the applicable public procurement rules, the evaluators will be selected by a selection committee responsible for evaluating the bids against the criteria set out in the ToR. All needed administrative steps are followed and the technical offers are thoroughly assessed against a previously established evaluation grid, which takes into account the elements in the ToR needed to perform the evaluations in a qualitative manner. The selection of the evaluators is done with a 70/30 technical score/price ratio. As a general rule, to ensure impartiality the persons appointed in the selection committee are different from the person who drafted the ToR.

4. Contract implementation

To ensure mutual understanding of the scoping, methodology to be applied and expected results, contract implementation starts with a kick-off meeting between parties to clarify all aspects of the ToR and technical offer and an Inception Report is requested. In addition, at least one mid-term progress report will keep the evaluation commissioners informed on the activities performed and further steps to be taken. The contract also includes a procedure for the early termination of the contract conditional on the quality of the work provided.

As a general rule, the person who drafted the ToR will be appointed as the MA's contract officer, playing a key role in assessing the quality of the inception and evaluation reports.

As regards the reports that are delivered, the Evaluation Unit shall be responsible for assessing the quality of the inception and final evaluation reports, by using the checklists presented in Annex B – Checklist for assessing the inception report and Annex C – Checklist for assessing the evaluation report. The checklist for assessing the quality of the inception report sets out the major aspects that need to be taken into account. The thorough checklist for assessing the evaluation reports includes the most important aspects for each part of a report as well as general considerations, allowing a thorough analysis of the report's quality. The checklists have two intended purposes that are related to evaluation management: (1) they represent tools for the evaluation commissioners to assess the content of the reports (2) they are practical tools to guide the evaluators, while preparing the reports. Therefore, the evaluators can self-rate their own progress during the writing phase. They can also use the checklists to identify weaknesses or areas that need to be addressed in their reports. To this end, the checklists shall also be included in the ToR for each evaluation, to serve as guidance for the evaluators in drafting the reports.

The reports are then consulted with the MC. While the checklists will represent a tool for the MA's contract officer to verify the evolution of the reports from one version to another (from draft reports to final reports), only the final reports are sent to MC together with the checklist filled in by the MA's contract officer.

5. Disseminating the evaluation results

Having in mind the quality of the process of disseminating the evaluation results, the reports are required to be delivered together with highly visual summarised content.

Details can be found in [Section B.6](#) – Strategy to ensure use and communication of evaluations.

6. Follow-up

The follow-up table used by MA for the progress achieved in implementing the agreed evaluation recommendations is a mean to ensure a structured way to both monitor achievements and keep the MC informed on all pending issues. As well, it ensures the practical use of the evaluation results and recommendations.

In case there will be a need to carry out evaluations internally, the Evaluation Unit will use the applicable elements of the checklist while drafting the Evaluation scope and timing and the subsequent evaluation reports, in order to ensure that the reports drafted internally follow as close as possible the standards requested from the ones commissioned to external experts.

C. PLANNED EVALUATIONS

The choices made below as regards Programme evaluation are well rooted into [Section A.4](#) – Analysis of relevant evidence, where more details on the justification of those choices may be found. For a first evaluation exercise, focus is needed on the efficiency and effectiveness criteria and visibility. Relevance and EU added value are also important aspects that would also feed into the next programming period. Another crucial factor is the fact that the TA funds of the Programme are limited (and depending on the level of eligible expenditures in the financed projects, in line with the TA flat rate approach) and have to cover the needs of programme structures, potential applicants and beneficiaries in eight countries. Given this, the evaluation themes covered have to also be limited, balancing the need to perform the analysis in such a wide variety of countries and languages.

The timings presented below are those anticipated at the time of writing the current EvalPlan and may be slightly adjusted in practice to the actual evolution of the programme, in order to reach the best need-benefit ratio, not requiring formal amendment of the EvalPlan. As well, practical experience has shown that delays may occur while applying the public procurement procedures needed to commit the evaluations. These kinds of delays are not regarded as needing to trigger EvalPlan amendments, should they not hinder the achievement of the final scope of the evaluations. However, major modifications as regards evaluation timing, scope, coverage or means of implementation may lead to the revision of the current document and formal EP amendment.

Assumptions on the expected evolution of the Programme

The following timetable as regards the finalisation of projects is taken into account in setting the timing of evaluations:

Call for proposals/ Projects	Allocation (Interreg funds)	Launching	Deadline	Estimated contracting time	Maximum duration of projects	Estimated end date of projects
1st Call (SO1.1, SO2.4, SO2.7 - both regular and small scale projects)	32,523,810 26,610,390 for regular projects 5,913,420 for small scale projects (split equally between priorities)	March 30th 2022	July 4th 2023	2nd Quarter 2024	30 months for regular projects 18 months for small scale projects	2nd Quarter 2027 for regular projects 2nd Quarter 2026 for small scale projects

2nd Call (SO1.1 - regular projects, SO2.4&SO 2.7 - both regular and small scale projects, ISO1 - small scale projects only)	44,758,514	1st Quarter 2024	2nd Quarter 2024	2nd Quarter 2025	30 months for regular projects 18 months for small scale projects	2nd Quarter 2028 for regular projects 2nd Quarter 2027 for small scale projects

Data collection

In order to minimise the risk derived from the length of evaluations, the Programme closely monitors the physical and financial achievements of the financed projects and keeps track of projections, so that informed implementation decisions may be made in due time based on own analysis. As regards the efficiency of the implementation system, applicants' and beneficiaries' feedback right away would be a valuable asset. The Programme may then be able to incorporate users' perceptions into the decision-making process, as an ongoing evaluation approach to streamline the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme, which is also in line with the Programme's participatory approach.

Therefore, **questionnaires** will be used at key points to collect feedback, their aggregated results feeding directly into informed evidence-based decisions. These questionnaires will be applied to all applicants after the calls for proposals are closed, to all unsuccessful applicants after project selection, to successful applicants after project contracting and to all beneficiaries after project finalisation. The actual questions in each questionnaire will be proposed by the Evaluation Unit and agreed with the MA Unit, while the responses will be aggregated by the Evaluation Unit and sent to the MA Unit for consideration. This approach would also allow the beneficiaries and applicants to fill in the information while it is still fresh and prevent them from receiving very long questionnaires at the time programme evaluations are performed, generating a higher response rate. The aggregated responses shall also be ready to be provided to the evaluators for the subsequent programme evaluations or other programme structures and may be used in technical or MC meetings.

For the implementation evaluation performed externally, most relevant data will be available in Jems, programme strategic and implementation documents, Description of the Monitoring and Control System (DMCS) and relevant procedures being also available. Given the 2021-2027 approach of the result indicators, it is expected that they will be measured by the Programme mostly based on Jems data, mirroring how successful EU action has been in achieving or progressing towards its objectives. Programme evaluation as regards effectiveness would therefore not have to measure the progress in achieving the indicators, but rather to analyse how the mechanisms behind worked, looking for evidence of why, whether or how the changes are linked to the EU intervention.

For some criteria (e.g. relevance) and for the impact evaluation, apart from the data available in Jems, the evaluators will have to base their work on other sources, including the statistical data in the participating countries. Therefore, collection of additional data from primary and secondary sources may be necessary to be performed by the evaluators as part of their contracts.

The territorial analysis performed for drafting the Programme revealed that the same type of data is not always available for all the regions covered by the Programme, or it is not always split by NUTS2 units or it is not that recent for some regions. The analysis was based on the information obtained from rendering the statistical data provided by international, national and local sources, further complemented by the study of different documents relevant for the policy objectives. The analysis had to be developed and conducted depending on the data and information available. A similar approach is expected to be needed for future Programme evaluations, complementing and enriching the statistical data available with information from the analysis of additional documents and documentation

obtained through national and regional level sources, in order to form a sound evaluation base, depending on the exact methodology applied.

1. LISTS AND TIMETABLE OF THE EVALUATIONS

Planned programme evaluations are summarised below:

Code	Objective of the evaluation	Content and scope of the evaluation			Estimated Period	Type of evaluation	Planned Cost
		Priorities	SOs	Interventions			
OngoingEval	To collect and take on users' feedback in order to streamline efficiency and effectiveness	All	All	All	December 2023-December 2029	Data collection	Internal resources
ImplemEval	To produce specific knowledge on the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, internal and external coherence, visibility and commitment to horizontal principles of the programme and to contribute to its management and performance	All	All	All	November 2025-July 2026	Implementation evaluation, including communication	70.000 euro
ImpactEval	To capture the policy-aimed effects of the cooperation programme as a whole, highlighting peak fields, while also analysing the mechanism that stand behind the effects	All	All	All	March-November 2028	Impact evaluation	100.000 euro

Additional evaluations

Additional evaluations may be carried out in case of emerging urgent needs, e.g. where programme monitoring reveals a significant gap from the goals initially set or where proposals are made for the revision of the programme.

These additional evaluations can address either issues regarding the entire programme or one or several priorities or specific objectives.

These evaluations cannot be anticipated at this stage and will be carried out either by external experts or by the Evaluation Unit.

Retrospective evaluation

The Commission shall carry out a retrospective evaluation to examine the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and EU added value of each fund by 31 December 2031. This evaluation shall focus in particular on the social, economic and territorial impact of the funds in relation to the supported policy objectives. Based on previous experience, Interreg is expected to be also covered under this evaluation. Should the Programme be part of the

sample of Interreg programmes to be actively covered by this evaluation, all necessary data and support will be provided to the evaluators selected by the EC.

OngoingEval – Ongoing collection, analysis and use of data on the efficiency of the implementation system of the Programme	
Priority and specific objectives covered by the evaluation	all
Types of interventions to be evaluated	all
Type of evaluation	ongoing process evaluation
Focus and rationale of the evaluation	The Programme aims to incorporate users' perceptions into the decision-making process in order to streamline its efficiency and effectiveness.
	By collecting users' opinions, the aggregated results are available to feed directly into informed evidence-based decisions, by increasing knowledge on what works and what needs improvements and why. Questionnaires are applied to all lead applicants after the calls for proposals are closed (to assess the application process), to all unsuccessful lead applicants after project selection, to successful lead partners after project contracting (to assess the selection and contracting processes) and to all beneficiaries after project finalization (to assess the implementation process and effectiveness at project level). The support granted by the programme structures to applicants and beneficiaries is also envisaged to be included, as well as the ease of reaching projects' objectives and the added value of the EU intervention.
	This approach not only supports the programme structures to adapt to the needs of the applicants and beneficiaries, but also allows the beneficiaries and applicants to fill in the information requested while it is still fresh and prevent them from receiving very long questionnaires at the time programme evaluations are performed, generating a higher response rate.
	The actual questions in each questionnaire are set before each process is launched, based on the proposals made by the Evaluation Unit that are discussed, adapted and agreed with the MA Unit. The responses are aggregated and analysed by the Evaluation Unit and sent in a structured form to the MA Unit for consideration and use during Programme implementation. The overall themes/main evaluation questions presented below will serve as basis for formulating the questions addressed to the lead applicants/beneficiaries, adapted to the type of respondents. Additional questions than the ones derived from the themes/main evaluation question below may be added along the way to incorporate any emerging needs or aspects that need basis for decisions.
	The responses received would also be ready to be provided to programme evaluators or other programme structures and may be used by the programme bodies in technical or MC meetings.
When the evaluation will be implemented	December 2023-December 2029
Main evaluation questions	**Efficiency** Q1. Are the application, selection and contracting processes efficient? What can be improved?

	(users' feedback on the application form and applicant's guide, selection and contracting process)
	Q2. What are the major difficulties faced by the beneficiaries? *(feedback on difficulties faced during project implementation stages, including project finalisation)*
	Q3. Is Jems efficient? What can be improved? *(feedback on the practical use of Jems)*
	Q4. Are the simplification actions taken at Programme level appreciated by users? What can be improved? *(feedback on Programme level actions taken – e.g. the use of SCOs)*
	Q5. Do the beneficiaries receive sufficient support from the Programme bodies to prepare projects and implement them? *(feedback on the support granted by the programme bodies to applicants and beneficiaries)*
	Q6. Are the potential beneficiaries and beneficiaries acquainted with the measures to prevent irregularities and aware of the anti-fraud measures taken by the Programme bodies? *(checking the beneficiaries' and potential beneficiaries' awareness – question also used as instrument to raise awareness)*
	Effectiveness
	Q7. According to the beneficiaries, have the projects managed to reach their objectives? *(beneficiaries' perception on the extent to which project objectives were reached)*
	Q8. Were the expected outputs and results at project level easily reachable? *(users' feedback on the ease of reaching the expected outputs and results)*
	Q9. Were there any internal or external factors that affected, positively or negatively, the process of reaching the objectives/expected outputs and results? *(users' feedback on internal and external factors affecting project objectives/expected outputs and results, including the quality of the partnership)*
	Q10. Did the beneficiaries' needs change from project submission to project implementation? If so, did the change affect project implementation? *(beneficiaries' feedback on the relevance of the needs covered any effect on effectiveness)* – also touching **relevance** criterion
	EU added value
	Q11. To what extent could the projects' results and outputs have been achieved without support from the Programme? *(users' feedback on the added value of the Programme for reaching the results and outputs)*
Methodological approach and possible methods	Method: qualitative research Tools: desk research, data collection through questionnaires and analysis
Data sources	administrative data on project lead applicants and project beneficiaries are needed to direct the questionnaires, available in Jems; to generate a high response rate, questionnaires reach the applicants and beneficiaries through their usual contact channels (e.g. JS officers, Jems)
How the evaluation will be implemented	internal expertise used, covering all calls for proposals and contracted projects
Planned cost (Euro)	internal resources used

ImplemEval – Implementation evaluation of the Programme, including the communication strategy	
Priority and specific objectives covered by the evaluation	all
Types of interventions to be evaluated	all
Type of evaluation	implementation evaluation
Focus and rationale of the evaluation	The risk of decommitment and the achievement of objectives in terms of output and result indicators, as well as forecasting based on the contracted and selected projects, are constantly monitored by the programme bodies in order to make informed decisions, therefore it is not included in the evaluation process. User's feedback on efficiency aspects is also collected constantly and feeds the decision-making process.

Since the implementation of the previous programme ran without major delays, the main bottlenecks have been overcome and the management and control system is a roll-over of the previous one, the evaluation does not cover in detail each and every part of this system and the procedural workflows, especially as feedback from the applicants and beneficiaries is collected, analysed and used after each step as part of the OngoingEval. Instead, it investigates whether there are bottlenecks or major issues faced and whether the new elements were effective in practice - as the use of SCOs, financing of regular and small scale projects, TA flat rate.

As regards efficiency, the evaluation focuses on identifying any underused simplification opportunities.

To deepen knowledge on the current programme, but also to feed into the next programming process, the evaluation also covers aspects related to the Programme's relevance.

Therefore, the implementation evaluation is performed in order to produce specific knowledge on the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance and visibility of the programme and to contribute to its management and performance.

The findings collected so far through the ongoing process evaluation shall also be provided to the evaluators to be used in their analysis. |
| **When the evaluation will be implemented** | November 2025-July 2026 |
| **Main evaluation questions** | **Effectiveness**

Q1. To what extent is the Programme delivery taking place as expected initially?
(whether the evolution of the programme is in line with the initial expectations of the Programme bodies)

Q2. Are there any internal or external factors that foster or affect the process of achieving the Programme's objectives and outcomes, at programme level or by specific objective?
(how does the delivery mechanism work and which factors have a contribution to achieving Programme outputs and results – e.g. use of SCOs, types of projects financed)

Q3. To what extent have the transnational partnerships in the Programme demonstrated effective collaboration and durability, contributing to the achievement of Programme's objectives?
(whether the partnerships are qualitative and durable and are a factor in achieving Programme's objectives)

Q4. To what extent is the administrative and financial capacity of the Programme bodies and of the beneficiaries a success or hindering factor? |

	(whether the capacity of programme bodies and beneficiaries affects or supports Programme delivery towards objectives; TA flat rate is also to be investigated under this question)
	Q5. Did the Programme take the necessary measures to effectively involve relevant partners in programme management and delivery? *(whether the measures taken by the programme to involve relevant partners in programme management and delivery are effective)*
	Efficiency
	Q6. Are there any bottlenecks or major issues affecting the efficiency of the Programme's implementation system? *(whether the efficiency of the Programme is affected by deficiencies in the implementation system)*
	Q7. To what extent does the Programme use the available options to streamline and simplify operations? *(whether the Programme found the right balance to streamline and simplify operations or more options should be taken into account)*
	Relevance
	Q8. To what extent did the programme strategy respond to the needs identified at programming stage? *(whether the Programme strategy responded in practice to the needs identified initially in the programming stage)*
	Q9. To what extent is the programme strategy relevant to the current needs of the people in the transnational area? *(whether the needs of the Programme area changed over time and are addressed by the Programme strategy)*
	Visibility/Communication Strategy
	Q10.Do the communication activities/actions carried out by the programme authorities lead to the achievement of the general and specific objectives set out in the Communication Strategy?
	Q11.Which are the instruments and tools that have the highest outreach to potential beneficiaries/beneficiaries/stakeholders/general public?
	Q12.How could the Programme's visibility be increased?
	Q13.How effective was the programme in supporting project communication activities? *(this set of four questions targets the evaluation of the communication strategy of the Programme, aims to point at what would be needed to reach more people in terms of Programme visibility)*
Methodological approach and possible methods	Method: mix of quantitative and qualitative methods Tools: data collection and analysis, desk research, interviews, surveys, stakeholder analysis, case studies
Data sources	programme strategic and implementation documents, DMCS and relevant procedures, Jems data, findings of the ongoing process evaluation
How the evaluation will be implemented	evaluation commissioned externally, following public procurement applicable rules (open procedure)
Planned cost (Euro)	70.000 euro

ImpactEval – Impact evaluation of the Programme	
Priority and specific objectives covered by the evaluation	all

Types of interventions to be evaluated	all
Type of evaluation	impact evaluation
Focus and rationale of the evaluation	The type of programme and its financial size as compared to the vast eligible area represent significant constraints for the programme to be able to bring a sizeable contribution to developing and enhancing research and innovation capacities, promoting climate change adaptation and disaster risk prevention or enhancing protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity and green infrastructure, supporting the capacity building of public authorities and stakeholders if they are regarded and evaluated from the perspective of policy-level regional development. In this context, a more suitable approach for this programme would be to perform the impact evaluation from the perspective of its overall transnational aim, taking into account the overall scope in the regulations. Therefore, the impact evaluation aims to capture the effects in deepening the relations with and among the participating countries (from the NDICI perspective), highlighting peak fields, while also analysing the mechanisms that stand behind the effects. Besides the impact, the criteria directly covered are EU added value and visibility. Other criteria, as effectiveness, relevance or coherence might need to be taken into consideration for answering certain evaluation questions (pointing to internal and external success or hindering factors). In assessing visibility, the impact of the communication activities/actions taken at Programme level shall also be evaluated. The evaluation findings will be available and may also be integrated into the final performance report to be submitted to EC by 15 February 2031.
When the evaluation will be implemented	February-October 2028
Main evaluation questions	**Impact** Q1. How do the transnational interventions of the Programme contribute to deepening the relations with and among the participating countries? *(to capture the impact at programme level from the external cooperation perspective; the extent to which the Programme contributed to the cooperation of key actors in the Programme area should be a central point, also having in mind the geography and structure of partnerships)* Q2. Which are the fields where the Programme brings the highest effects and why? *(to highlight the wider or more narrow fields where the programme has the highest impact; the effects in the financed fields should be examined bearing in mind the limited funds available and the specific transnational scope of the Programme; in analysing the effects both the current and expected contribution should be taken into account – based on the finalised and contracted projects;* *given the transnational character, the overall analysis should take account of the following wider scopes:* - *enhanced transition to a competitive and sustainable blue economy in the Black Sea Basin* - *increased readiness and adaptability of the society regarding environmental and climate change related hazards in the Black Sea Basin* - *enhanced protection and preservation of nature and reduced pollution in the Black Sea Basin* - *enhanced capacity of public authorities and stakeholders in the Black Sea Basin)*

	Q3. Are there any unintended or spill-over effects of the transnational interventions, inside or beyond the eligible area?
	(to identify any unintended/spill-over effects of the Programme)
	Q4. What are the internal and external factors fostering or affecting the effects of the Programme?
	(to analyse relevant influencing factors and point out the most important ones)
	EU added value
	Q5. To what extent has the Programme brought outputs and results that cannot be adequately achieved at national level? Can specific examples be provided?
	(whether the results and outputs would have been reached without EU funds – e.g. by the participating states acting alone with national funds or by the beneficiaries without grants received for cooperation)
	Visibility
	Q6. Is the Programme successful in raising the awareness of the beneficiaries/potential beneficiaries/general public on the positive impact of the EU financial contribution?
	Q7. Which communication activities/actions or instruments/tools were the most effective?
	Q8. How could this effect be increased in the next programming period?
	Q9. Are the actions taken for the capitalisation of results effective in maximizing/multiplying the impact of the Programme?
	(this set of four questions aims to capture the impact achieved by the Programme's communication activities/actions)
Methodological approach and possible methods	Method: theory-based evaluation (realist evaluation and contribution analysis are taken into account at this stage, but the exact combination of methods is requested from the external evaluators)
	Tools: desk research, interviews, focus groups, expert panels, case studies, surveys
Data sources	programme strategic and implementation documents, DMCS and relevant procedures, Jems data, findings of the ongoing process evaluation
How the evaluation will be implemented	evaluation commissioned externally, following public procurement applicable rules (open procedure)
Planned cost (Euro)	100.000 euro

ANNEXES

ANNEX A – CHECKLIST FOR ASSESSING THE TERMS OF REFERENCES

The present ToR Checklist[8] was produced as part of the Guide for Drafting the Evaluation Plans of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy in Romania and it was adjusted.

A checked box by a question indicates that item is not problematic.

Checklist	Yes
1. The administrative specifications	
1.1. Is the weight of price in comparison to the other selection criteria balanced and not excessive?	☐
1.2. Is the structure of the technical offer indicated (main contents, chapters, length, etc.)?	☐
2. The technical specifications	
2.1. Context, objectives and scope	
2.1.1. Is the policy context of the evaluation (EU regulation, Evaluation Plan, OP and other EU or national relevant decisions) explained?	☐
2.1.2. Are the main objectives and the users of the evaluation identified?	☐
2.1.3. Is the type of evaluation (e.g. preliminary study, implementation or process, impact, mix of different types) defined?	☐
2.1.4. Are the interventions to evaluate, the territory to cover and the period to examine (the scope of the evaluation) well-defined and clearly distinguishable?	☐
2.1.5. Is a brief description of the implementation and the advancement of the interventions to evaluate provided?	☐
2.1.6. Are the key stakeholders of the evaluation identified?	☐
2.1.7. Are the evaluation questions clearly stated? Are the key evaluation questions well-defined?	☐
2.1.8. Is the ToC of the interventions to evaluate clarified? Or, is the evaluator requested to identify the pertinent ToC?	☐
2.2. Methodology	
2.2.1. Is the general methodological framework suggested? And, is a request for major specification of the methodological approach made?	☐
2.2.2. Is expected data to use defined? And, is a request for major specification of necessary data and collection tools made?	☐
2.2.3. Is a request for clarifying the main methodological techniques and analyses to use clearly made?	☐
2.2.4. Are the main tasks to fulfil in the evaluation identified?	☐
2.2.5. Is a request for specifying the methods used to validate results and findings of the evaluation made?	☐

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[8] The checklist uses different sources and adapts their contents according to the experience of the authors; in particular see: Evaluation Checklist, Gary Miron (2004); Checklist for preparing the Evaluation Report ILO (2021); EVALSED: The resource for the evaluation of Socio-Economic Development (2013)

Checklist	Yes
2.2.6. Are the main deliverables (reports, meetings) of the evaluation defined? And, are their main expected contents specified?	☐
2.2.7. Are a risk assessment of the evaluation process and a specific quality control requested?	☐
2.3. *Professional qualifications*	
2.3.1. Are requirements for skills and experience of the team clearly defined? And, are these requirements coherent with the service requested?	☐
2.3.2. Are requirements for skills and experience clearly interpretable, sufficiently wide to be found in the market and not limit competition?	☐
2.3.3. Is the multidisciplinary composition of the team expressly detailed (if necessary)?	☐
2.3.4. Is the request of specifying the distributions of roles and responsibilities in the team made?	☐
3. **Budget and Payment**	
3.1. Is the maximum price for the evaluation stated?	☐
3.2. Is specified how the budget of the evaluation has to be presented (total cost, detailed budget for main voices, etc.)?	☐
3.3. Are the timing and the amount of the payments unambiguously defined?	☐
4. **General**	
4.1. Is the number of objectives and evaluation questions not excessive? Can they be addressed in a unique evaluation?	☐
4.2. If doubts on the feasibility of the evaluation exist, is a feasibility analysis included in the requests and a potential "plan B" defined (e.g. alternative approaches or the break of the contract)?	☐
4.3. Is the language used clear, simple and always well-focused on the main elements?	☐
4.4. Are all the requests sufficient and adequate to assess the proposals according to the adopted selection criteria?	☐

ANNEX B – Checklist for assessing the inception report

The present Inception Report Checklist[9] is used for assessing the quality of inception reports.

A checked box by a statement indicates that item is not problematic. Details are included below each statement

Checklist	Yes
1. General quality statements	
1.1. All provisions in the Terms of Reference and in the Technical Offer are addressed	☐
Details: …	
1.2. All aspects agreed in the kick-off meeting are addressed	☐
Details: …	
1.3. The approach for data collection is reasonable, feasible and likely to provide all information needed to answer the evaluation questions (particularly as regards data availability at beneficiary level)	☐
Details: …	
1.4. The ratio between desk research and fieldwork is adequate to provide the information needed to answer the evaluation questions	☐
Details: …	
1.5. Statistical or other appropriate data analysis methods are proposed, whether the data are obtained from the national administrations or are generated by the consultant through surveys or by gaining access to administrative data	☐
Details: …	
1.6. Fieldwork is described and research methods are appropriate - such as interviewing methods - online, telephone or face to face, interviews with stakeholders, focus groups; the proposed questionnaires include all the appropriate questions (balance between open and closed questions, impartiality, clarity, specificity etc.) and the forms/models proposed are appropriate	☐
Details: …	
1.7. Identification of regions and projects for case studies is based on statistical or other appropriate analysis	☐
Details: …	
1.8. In case there is an association between economic operators, the coordination mechanism between the consortium members is established	☐
Details: …	
1.9. Quality control procedures for all deliverables are established	☐
Details: …	

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[9] This checklist was also used for the 2014-2020 programming period.

ANNEX C – Checklist for assessing the evaluation report

The present Evaluation Report Checklist[10] was produced as part of the Guide for Drafting the Evaluation Plans of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy in Romania.

Instructions: Rate each component of the report using the following rubrics. Place a check mark in the cell that corresponds to your rating on each checkpoint. If the item or checkpoint is not applicable to the report, indicate the "NA" cell to the far right. Comments may be added in the dedicated row in each section.

1=Not addressed, 2=Partially addressed, 3=Fully addressed, NA=Not applicable

Checklist	1	2	3	NA
1. Executive Summary				
1.1. The programme/ IP/ SO/ theme evaluated is well described	☐	☐	☐	☐
1.2. Evaluation questions and purpose of the evaluation are presented	☐	☐	☐	☐
1.3. A brief description of methods and analytical strategy (if appropriate) is provided	☐	☐	☐	☐
1.4. A summary of main findings and policy implications or recommendations is included	☐	☐	☐	☐
1.5. Length is adequate (in general no more than 10-12 pages, or around 10% of the report)	☐	☐	☐	☐
1.6. Comments:				
2. Introduction				
2.1. The introduction helps the reader in approaching the report	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.2. An overview of the report and the description of report structure are available	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.3. Objectives and scope of the evaluation are clearly presented	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.4. The programme/ intervention to evaluate, its expected use and relevant users are specified	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.5. References of the evaluation to the Evaluation Plan and other possible decisions of the MC are included	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.6. Evaluation questions and how they have been identified (e.g. interviews, surveys, discussion with the MA, meetings with MC and the stakeholders, etc.) are clearly described	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.7. Evaluation criteria included in the analysis are specified, as well as their relations with the evaluation questions	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.8. The target population of the programme/ IP/ SO (as relevant) and territorial areas covered by the intervention are clearly identified	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.9. The main stakeholders of the evaluation are clearly identified	☐	☐	☐	☐

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[10] The checklist uses different sources and adapts their contents according to the experience of the authors; in particular see: Evaluation Checklist, Gary Miron (2004); Checklist for preparing the Evaluation Report ILO (2021); EVALSED: The resource for the evaluation of Socio-Economic Development (2013)

Checklist	1	2	3	NA
2.10. Comments:				
3. Background and context				
3.1. A description of the programme/ IP/ SO/ theme being evaluated (its strategy in terms of economic and social cohesion, strategic importance in the OP, etc.) is included	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.2. The cause-effect relations underlying the programme/intervention are explicitly presented (a ToC or other interpretative framework)	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.3. The implementation of the programme/ intervention is well described and allows to understand possible bottlenecks or difficulties	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.4. The main interactions with other relevant European or national policies are identified and described	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.5. A well-focused review of the related literature is available to identify what is already known (including aspects on previous and similar financing and lessons learned etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.6. Comments:				
4. Methodology				
4.1. Evaluation approach and its rationale are clearly described and fit the ToC and the evaluation questions	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.2. Sources of information and data are adequately presented (e.g. primary or secondary data, sampling method, statistical error, questionnaires, timing of data collection, etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.3. Analytical techniques are well described and allow to understand the reliability of the results	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.4. The strategy of combining methods/approaches (if any) is justified and allows to answer the evaluation questions properly.	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.5. Possible limitations of the evaluation are specified (e.g. limitations related to methods, data sources, potential sources of bias etc.)	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.6. Comments:				
5. Main findings				
5.1. The methodology is correctly applied	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.2. Details of analyses and findings are clearly and logically described	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.3. Analyses and findings cover all main aspects as deriving from the cause-effect relationships identified with the help of the ToC or other interpretative framework used	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.4. Discussion of evaluation findings is objective and complete, including – where relevant – both negative and positive findings	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.5. Findings are supported by evidence and are consistent with methods and data used	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.6. All evaluation questions are addressed, and an explanation is included for questions that could not be answered	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.7. Findings with regard to the examined evaluation criteria and the evaluation questions are presented	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.8. Unintended and unexpected results are discussed (if the case, applying to impact evaluations)	☐	☐	☐	☐

Checklist	1	2	3	NA

Checklist	1	2	3	NA
9.1. The report is written clearly and set out logically	☐	☐	☐	☐
9.2. The report presents an independent point of view and is not influenced by any stakeholder	☐	☐	☐	☐
9.3. Specialized concepts are used only when necessary and clearly described (when useful, a glossary is included)	☐	☐	☐	☐
9.4. Cross-cutting issues such as: (i) gender; (ii) tripartite and social dialogue issues (iii) international labour standards, (iv) environmental sustainability and (v) medium and long- term effects of capacity development action are assessed (if requested)	☐	☐	☐	☐
9.5. All data is disaggregated by sex, age, ethnic group or other relevant demographic categories, where feasible;	☐	☐	☐	☐
9.6. Charts, tables and graphs are understandable and appropriately and consistently labelled	☐	☐	☐	☐
9.7. The report addresses the demand of the commissioner/s and is useful	☐	☐	☐	☐
9.8. Comments:				

A first set of evaluation questions was consulted with the stakeholders via an online questionnaire, which was posted on the Programme website and on social media and sent to MC members. In response, half of the answers received were from MC members and the other half from stakeholders or former beneficiaries and applicants, covering respondents from 5 out of the 8 countries participating in the programme.

All sets of questions grouped by evaluation type and evaluation criteria received scores above 3.85 on a scale from 0 to 5. For 80% of the sets of questions the score received was above 4 and for 40% of the sets of questions the score received was above 4.5. These scores indicate high to very high usefulness of the proposed evaluation questions. The highest overall score was received by the set of questions related to relevance under ImplemEval (4.8), followed by the sets of questions under OngoingEval related to efficiency (4.71) and effectiveness (4.63), these themes being the most appreciated by the respondents. At the other end of the scale, the lowest scores were received by the sets of questions under ImpactEval related to EU added value (3.86) and visibility (3.88). These two scores were affected by a ranking of 1 point received from one respondent each. However, these two respondents did not include any proposals to improve the proposed approach.

More than half of the respondents stated that the proposed questions are comprehensive and no other aspects are to be added. In addition, the following aspects were raised:

Points of concern/Proposed questions	Proposed actions	Covered Yes/No	Related EQ
The following question should be revised as following. Q6. Are potential beneficiaries and beneficiaries aware of the irregularities anti-fraud measures taken by the Programme bodies?	Question revised as follows: Are potential beneficiaries and beneficiaries acquainted with the measures to prevent irregularities and aware of the anti-fraud measures taken by the Programme bodies?	Yes	OngoingEval Q6
achievement of the programme s strategy	Achievement of the indicators, related to the achievement of the Programme's strategy, is constantly monitored by the Programme bodies. Other aspects related to the achievement of the Programme's strategy are part of the analysis regarding effectiveness and impact.	Yes	ImplemEval Q1-Q3 ImpactEval Q2-Q4
Impacts prospects should be analysed more deeply during the future Programme evaluations.	Impact evaluation covers all the fields financed by the programme, as presented in the descriptions for the evaluation questions included in the fiches of planned evaluations.	Yes	ImpactEval Q2

How compatible are the program priorities with the priorities of the Black Sea Region when compared at the national level?Which priority issue would you like to be included that is important for your nation and will have a positive impact on transnational countries? From where.	Any such issues should be pointed out while analysing the relevance of the Programme's strategy to the needs in the transnational area.	Yes	ImplemEval Q9
Is the amount of funds allocated to the program budget by the EU commission sufficient?	Should the limited funding be a constraint for the Programme and financed projects, this should be pointed out during the analysis of factors affecting the Programme's implementation and effects.	Yes	OngoingEval Q9 ImplemEval Q2 ImpactEval Q4
Is there any budget item that you think would increase the effectiveness of the projects that you would like to add to the budget items?	Should additional budget items be needed, this should be pointed out in the feedback collected from project applicants and beneficiaries under OngoingEval and during the analysis of factors affecting the Programme's implementation.	Yes	OngoingEval Q1-Q2, Q9 ImplemEval Q2

ANNEX E – PROCEDURAL ASPECTS

The current annex presents the procedural aspects regarding the implementation of the EvalPlan.

Drafting of preparatory documents for commissioning evaluations externally

Planning for the evaluations that will be carried out by external experts shall begin at least 9 months in advance of their intended start date. The first stage in the process will be the drafting of the ToR, which builds upon the information included in this EvalPlan.

Drafting of the ToR is one of the key tasks of the Evaluation Unit. The ToR document serves as a guide to drafting offers and performing evaluations and is a central part of the public procurement dossier for contracting the evaluation services.

Once agreed with the MA Unit and once funds have been secured in the MDPWA budget in order to finance the evaluation, the public procurement process can begin. The ToR may be adjusted during the internal institutional approval process prior to launching the public procurement. The contracting time depends on the evolution of the public procurement process.

Carrying out evaluations with internal expertise

If the evaluations are carried out with internal expertise, the following steps should be followed:

1. Drafting a document on the Evaluation scope comprising the methodology to be used in order to perform the evaluation and a timetable for the activities to be carried out;

2. Producing a draft evaluation report (deadline - 6 months from the approval of the Evaluation scope and timing)

3. Ensuring that the draft evaluation report is sent to MC for comments;

4. Drafting the final evaluation report based on the comments from the MC;

5. Sending the final evaluation report to MC members for approval;

6. Approval of the final evaluation report by MC, after treating any additional comments or observations.

Evaluation Unit/MA's staff's tasks related to the evaluation function

General tasks

 ➢ coordinating the evaluation activities of the Interreg programmes in line with the relevant regulations;
 ➢ drafting, revising and implementing the Evaluation Plans; organising timely programme evaluations and following the monitoring of the resulting recommendations;
 ➢ managing procurements and contracts for evaluation activities;
 ➢ supporting evaluation teams for programme evaluations carried out at the initiative of the Commission or of ECU;
 ➢ representing the Interreg programmes at evaluation coordination events organised by ECU (e.g. Evaluation Working Group);
 ➢ participating in training and evaluation capacity building activities organised by ECU, Interact or other bodies;
 ➢ being the key liaison point with major stakeholders for evaluation purposes;
 ➢ contributing to developing and refining indicators for the Interreg programmes;
 ➢ ensuring the evaluation reports are disseminated and made available to the public;
 ➢ tracking progress on the follow-up given to the findings of evaluations.

Tasks related to the evaluation, commissioned externally

- ➢ attending and reporting to meetings of the MC or facilitating the participation of the contracted experts, if required;
- ➢ commissioning of evaluation contracts (preparing tender documentation, drafting ToR, participating in the evaluation committee for choosing successful tenderers);
- ➢ once contracted, monitoring and supervising the activities undertaken during the evaluation exercise (facilitating the meetings of key stakeholders with the evaluators, liaising with the evaluators contracted to provide evaluation services, facilitating suitable levels of access for consultants to key stakeholders during the course of their evaluation work, ensuring proper access for evaluators to the relevant monitoring and other available data, managing the Unit repository, which holds all relevant evaluation materials);
- ➢ quality controlling of all evaluation reports submitted under the terms of an evaluation contract (endorsing inception reports, ensuring evaluators meet deadlines for report submissions, commenting on draft reports, assessing the final evaluation reports against the evaluation grids).

Tasks related to the evaluations carried out internally (should such evaluations be deemed necessary)

- ➢ drafting the Evaluation scope and timing and submitting them to the MA Unit for consultation and endorsement;
- ➢ carrying out the evaluations (undertaking activities to support the evaluation project - collection of relevant data, including desk research, consultations with relevant stakeholders within the evaluation scope, etc., drawing up draft evaluation reports and final evaluation reports).