

Minutes of the 2nd Annual Meeting of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021

Date:

11th April 2019

Venue:

Hotel Bôrik, Bratislava

Agenda

9:45 – 10:00	Opening remarks (NFP, donors)
10:00 – 10:45	Status of the Programmes implementation in the Slovak Republic
10:45 – 11:10	Discussion and approval of the Strategic Report for 2018
11:10 – 11:20	<i>Coffee break</i>
11:20 – 11:30	Bilateral relations – status of the JCBF and Work Plan implementation
11:30 – 11:50	Status of the Management and Control Systems at national level
11:50 – 12:00	Communication and publicity
12:00 – 12:20	Recommendations, discussion and expectations for upcoming period
12:20 – 12:30	Closing remarks

General

The 2nd Annual Meeting was aimed at evaluating the progress made so far and discussing further steps to be taken in the preparation and launching of programmes under the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021 in Slovakia as well as reviewing the Strategic Report for 2018.

Summary

Opening Remarks

A short opening speech was made by the representative of the National Focal Point (NFP) and the representatives of the Donor States. The NFP welcomed all participants at the 2nd Annual Meeting and summed up agenda of the meeting. The Donors thanked for the organisation of the Annual Meeting and pointed out the signature of the three Programme Agreements in November 2018 as very good example of positive development. The Mission of Liechtenstein to the EU highlighted that Liechtenstein priority areas for the 2014 – 2021 period are education and culture.

Status of the Programmes implementation in the Slovak Republic

The Programme Operators (PO) for Programmes operated by the Government Office of the SR summed up implementation status. The Programme Agreements were concluded for the Programmes *Cultural Entrepreneurship, Cultural Heritage and Cultural Cooperation; Good Governance, Accountable Institutions, Transparency/Cross-border Cooperation and Domestic and Gender-based Violence* in November 2018. Within the two latter, the PO indicated possible modifications within the Programme Agreements. Nevertheless, the PO prepares calls for proposals and other implementation documentation. For the Programme *Local Development, Poverty Reduction and Roma Inclusion*, the revised Concept Note was submitted to the Financial Mechanism Office (FMO). According to the FMO, the current Concept Note needs further improvement before it could be submitted to the Donors for their approval. The PO has agreed to continue working on improving the Concept Note based on the feedback provided by the FMO.

The Ministry of Environment of the SR informed about the development of the Programme *Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation*. The draft Programme Agreement should be submitted to the Donors for approval shortly.



The Research Agency informed about the development of the Programme *Business Development, Innovation and SMEs*. The Programme Agreement should also be submitted to the Donors for approval shortly.

The Donors informed about the status of implementation of the *Active Citizens Fund* and *Social Dialogue – Decent Work*. For both Funds the Programme Agreements were signed in June 2018 and now the project proposals submitted under the first calls are being assessed.

The Donors underlined the importance of submitting accurate forecasts for financial allocations within the Interim Financial Reports for the Programmes. Donors have also encouraged the NFP to monitor Programmes from the perspectives of results and risks in order to understand what difference the Programmes have made, for whom and how, as well as to encourage continuing learning of what works.

With respect to the discussion at the 1st Annual Meeting, the Research Agency informed also on the results of the audit that took place in 2018. The Agency together with the Ministry of Education adopted new procedures for evaluation and new evaluation criteria for demand driven calls for research projects; these were discussed and approved at several levels of partnership committees – universities, Slovak Academy of Sciences, line ministries and respective partners from the industry. All measures were closely discussed with European Commission and audited by Ministry of Finance of the SR with positive response.

Discussion and approval of the Strategic Report for 2018

The NFP mentioned that the Strategic Report was prepared in terms of guidance provided by the FMO in the seminar for the NFPs in January 2019. The Donors consider the Strategic Report of good quality, sufficiently reflecting the current status of implementation. In the future, it is recommended providing more information on the status of the Programmes. The Donors also recommended carrying out the mid-term evaluation in 2022 and final evaluation in 2024. The Strategic Report was officially approved.

Bilateral relations – status of the JCBF and Work Plan implementation

The representative of the NFP informed about the meetings of the Joint Committee for Bilateral Funds (JCBF) and status of preparation of pre-defined initiatives and calls under the Fund for Bilateral Relations. First calls should be launched in May / June 2019. Representative of the Mission of Liechtenstein to the EU agreed with the NFP that the implementation of the pre-defined project concerning celebration of 300 years of principality of Liechtenstein should be implemented in the 2019, if possible, or at a later stage. In addition, the representative of the Mission of Liechtenstein to the EU requested to include the Embassy of the Principality of Liechtenstein in Vienna in information loop regarding the implementation of pre-defined initiatives focused on Presidency of the SR in OSCE.

Status of the Management and Control Systems at national level

The Audit Authority (Ministry of Finance of the SR) informed on the performance of compliance audit of the Management and Control System (MCS) at national level that was completed in January 2019. The Audit Authority is waiting for the submission of the Management and Control System of the Programme Operator (the Government Office of the SR) and is ready to perform compliance audit.

The NFP, after having received an input from the Audit Authority, asked the FMO whether it is possible to launch the calls for proposals prior to the adoption of the MSC at programme level. The FMO provided the answer via e-mail after the Annual Meeting, stating that the Regulations do not provide for a link between the timing of the launching of the calls (Art. 7.3) and the timing of the approval by the NFP of the MCS at programme level (Art. 5.7). If the NFP, after having verified the text of the calls, agrees that the calls can be launched in parallel with the process of the preparation/approval of the MCS at programme level, the PO could proceed with launching the calls.

Communication and publicity

The NFP informed about the update of the Communication Strategy and communication activities that took place in previous period. Special attention was paid to the activities where the visibility of the Grants was supported by cooperation between NFP and Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the SR. The Donors appreciated the good work in the communication also with the social media and informed that by approval of the Strategic Report the updated Communication Strategy was accepted. The Royal Norwegian Embassy in Bratislava pointed out to the newly published videos summarizing the outcomes of the previous programming period. The NFP very much appreciated this initiative and made sure that the videos are also shared through the official channels of the NFP.

Recommendations, discussion and expectations for upcoming period

The NFP recommended to Donors to develop universal portal for partner search where entities from Beneficiary States and Donors States could present themselves and have a possibility to find a partner. The Donors also received feedback that there is a need for developing such tool but could not promise this will happen in the future, however, this is something to look into. Still, partial databases in various areas of interest do exist and the representative of the Mission of Liechtenstein to the EU informed that such database is being prepared in the area of culture in case of partners from Liechtenstein.

Further, the NFP asked about the expectations of the FMO in regard of verification of the Calls for proposals, whether there are extensive comments to be expected. The FMO stated that there is a risk based approach to the review of the Call texts. The FMO does not approve the call texts; however they provide the PO with comments especially at the beginning of implementation. Based on the experience in other countries, the FMO presented extensive substantial comments.

The NFP expressed the expectations to see more quality in the projects and the partnerships, i.e. to only support quality applications. The expectation was seconded also by the Donors who stressed the importance of good bilateral cooperation and not only creation of formal bilateral partnerships. The Audit Authority pointed out also importance of synergy effects and avoiding of overlaps with EU Structural Funds.

Moreover, the representative of the Mission of Liechtenstein to the EU informed that Liechtenstein entities should be approached at a very early stage by Slovak project promoters with their request for cooperation. They need to have sufficient time to evaluate the proposal, see a chance to contribute to project development and implementation. Otherwise it is very likely they will not be able to respond positively to a cooperation request.

The NFP suggested extension of the deadline for the review of progress in the implementation of the MoU, i.e. deadline for reallocation that is now 31st December 2020. The Donors informed that the discussion on the approach for the mid-term review has already started with the FMO. Deadline for mid-term review cannot be changed, but the decision on allocation of the reserve and possible reallocations between Programmes may be taken later than by end of 2020.

The FMO provided brief information on status of GrACE.

The Annual Meeting was followed by an on-site visit of the pre-defined project *Revitalisation of the Gardens of the Estate of Rusovce*, to be supported under the Culture Programme. The representatives of the Donors, Royal Norwegian Embassy in Bratislava, FMO, Project Promoter (the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic) and the mayor of Rusovce participated in the visit.

Decisions taken:

- **The Donors approved the Strategic Report 2018 for EEA FM and NFM 2014 – 2021;**
- **The Donors accepted the updated communication strategy.**