

Minutes of the 4th Annual Meeting of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021

Date:

09th June 2021

Venue:

Videoconference – MS Teams video meeting

Agenda

10:00 – 10:10	Opening remarks (NFP, Donors)
10:10 – 11:20	Status of the programmes' implementation and risk assessment (POs and NFP)
11:20 – 11:30	Status of the Management and Control Systems (NFP, AA, CA, IR)
11:30 – 11:40	Discussion and approval of the Strategic Report for 2020 (NFP, Donors)
11:40 – 11:50	Bilateral relations – status of the JCBF and Work Plan implementation and Communication and publicity (NFP)
11:50 – 12:00	Closing remarks

General

The 4th Annual Meeting was aimed at evaluating the progress made in the implementation of programmes under the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021 in Slovakia as well as reviewing and approval of the Strategic Report for 2020.

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 4th Annual Meeting which was held on-line due to ongoing travel restrictions related to the COVID-19. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway (NMFA) stated that the EEA and Norway Grants programming period 2009 – 2014 has been closed on 2nd March 2021, allowing full focus on implementation of the 2014 – 2021 programming period and at the same time appreciated the progress made in all the Programmes implemented in Slovakia. The representative of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iceland thanked the participants for the cooperation within the EEA and Norway Grants and informed about the termination of his relations within the Grants due to a new assignment. The representative of Mission of the Principality of Liechtenstein to the EU underlined the interest of Liechtenstein in Slovakia as priority partner and acknowledged the need to propose concrete predefined activity to be implemented by Liechtenstein under the Fund for Bilateral Relations. At the same time, she also informed about her new assignment. The Royal Norwegian Embassy in Bratislava confirmed the positive impact of the Grants in Slovakia to reducing disparities and supporting bilateral relations.

Status of the Programmes implementation in the Slovak Republic

The Programme Operator (PO) for Programmes operated by the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization of the SR summed up the implementation status in the Programmes 'Good Governance, Accountable Institutions, Transparency/Cross-border Cooperation'; 'Cultural Entrepreneurship, Cultural Heritage and Cultural Cooperation'; 'Domestic and Gender-based Violence' and 'Local Development, Poverty Reduction and Roma Inclusion'. The PO informed about the progress in the predefined projects, the Calls for proposals announced and number of projects already supported. The NFP considers these Programmes risk-free with no major concerns, since the challenging situation within the 'Domestic and Gender-based Violence' Programme was solved and the Programme is again up and running. The NMFA appreciated good progress in implementation and also confirmed satisfaction with the cooperation of the Donor Programme Partners and International Partner Organisations. Subsequently, the NMFA informed about the

plan of the FMO to carry out the external monitoring of the 'Good Governance, Accountable Institutions, Transparency/Cross-border Cooperation' Programme in 2Q/3Q 2021.

The Ministry of Environment of the SR as the PO for the 'Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Programme' informed about the status of the implementation of the Programme, number of supported projects, launching of the predefined project and selection of remaining two calls for proposals. Both the NFP and NMFA appreciated great progress made in the Programme in 2020.

The PO for the 'Business Development, Innovation and SMEs' Programme, the Research Agency informed about the selection process of the only call announced so far and confirmed that the main business call was approved by the NFP and is ready to be announced, followed by remaining calls till the end of 2021. The NFP is expecting the response of the donors to the risk mitigation proposal submitted, and reassured all donors that it is open to compromise so that all Donor Programme Partners will be unaffected. The NMFA is concerned by the lack of progress in the largest Programme and urged the PO to speed up the internal processes.

Status of the Management and Control Systems

The NFP informed about the transfer of competences of the National Focal Point from the Government Office of the SR to the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization of the SR since October 2020 and about the related update of the Detailed Description of the Management and Control System at the national level.

The Audit Authority (Ministry of Finance of the SR) informed on the performance of system audits at the level of POs, audits of expenditures of the Technical Assistance, Fund for Bilateral Relations and audits of management costs in selected Programmes and planned audits in 2021.

The Certifying Authority (Ministry of Finance of the SR) summed up tasks performed in 2020 and informed about the planned update of the Funding and Financial Management System of the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism for the 2014 – 2021 programming period, version 3.0. The Irregularities Authority informed that the irregularities detected and announced so far fall under the exemption regime under Article 12.5 of the Regulations.

The NMFA is glad to see the transfer of competencies has not impacted the work of the NFP and stressed out the importance of realistic forecasts of disbursement of funds.

Discussion and approval of the Strategic Report for 2020

The NFP mentioned that the Strategic Report was elaborated in accordance with the Annotated template for strategic reports and submitted 2 months prior to the Annual Meeting. The Donors thanked the NFP for the timely submission of the Strategic Report 2020. The Donors consider the Strategic Report 2020 of very good quality, comprehensive and providing valuable assessment of the social, economic and political development in Slovakia. For the next year more results are expected to be reported on, with active reference to the results framework and indicators. More details on the type of monitoring activities performed by the NFP as well as more information on mid-term evaluations of the 'Innovation' and 'Domestic and Gender-based Violence' Programmes to be conducted in 2022 shall be included. The Strategic Report 2020 was formally approved by the Donors.

Bilateral relations – status of the JCBF and Work Plan implementation and Communication and publicity

The representative of the NFP informed about the targeted call for proposals for on-line activities announced by the NFP under the Fund for Bilateral Relations and mentioned that several initiatives from previous calls were terminated because of the COVID-19 situation. Further, the NFP informed that next JCBF meeting is planned to be held in autumn 2021. With respect to publicity a working group with the POs and the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Bratislava was established with the aim to boost the visibility of the EEA and Norway

Grants in Slovakia. In cooperation with the PO, 18 publicity videos from the projects implemented under the 'Cultural Entrepreneurship, Cultural Heritage and Cultural Cooperation' Programme were prepared and will be published on social media soon.

The NMFA appreciated the good work within the bilateral relations and that despite the COVID-19 situation the JCBF is still active and functioning. The Norwegian Embassy in Bratislava also confirmed excellent cooperation. Liechtenstein appreciated the flexible setup of the JCBF in Slovakia and will submit the predefined project idea as soon as it will materialise. The Donors informed that by the approval of the Strategic Report, the updated Communication Strategy has also been accepted.

Closing remarks

The NFP invited the Donors to video-visit two projects implemented, one under the 'Good Governance, Accountable Institutions, Transparency/Cross-border Cooperation' Programme and one under the 'Cultural Entrepreneurship, Cultural Heritage and Cultural Cooperation' Programme.

At the end, the NMFA provided brief summary of implementation of the Active Citizens Fund (ACF); the Social Dialogue – Decent Work Programme, the Fund for Youth Employment and the Fund for Regional Cooperation (attachment 1).

Decisions taken:

- **The Donors approved the Strategic Report 2020 for EEA FM and NFM 2014 – 2021;**
- **The Donors accepted the updated Communication Strategy.**

Attachment 1: A presentation of programmes directly managed by the FMO