

Assessment of CEE National Operational Programmes and Recovery Plans under Next Generation EU

Report

December 2023

**An assessment report on the
implementation of selected CEE
national Operational Programmes
under the MFF and national
Recovery and Resilience Plans
under the Next Generation EU
programme Multiannual Financial
Framework**



This assessment report evaluates the progress and implementation status of selected National Operational Programmes within Central and Eastern European countries under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Additionally, it examines the advancement and alignment of National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) under the Next Generation EU Programme.

The assessment was conducted through a comprehensive review of documentation, reports, and available data provided by the respective countries, as well as consultations with stakeholders, expert opinions, and analyses of EU Commission reports.



Acknowledgements

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Date of publication: 12.2023

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1. Slovenia

The evaluation of DNSH (Do No Significant Harm) adherence within Slovenia's Operational Programme (OP) and Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) has highlighted substantial challenges affecting key projects. Umanotera's analysis of DNSH assessments and guidelines from the Ministry for Cohesion and Regional Development revealed notable shortcomings and contentious instances impacting the effective implementation of DNSH.

The identified issues, particularly the deficient DNSH analysis in flood protection measures and the reintroduction of road construction projects, despite their earlier exclusion, underscore inconsistencies and gaps in DNSH application. Inadequate assessments in flood protection failed to address crucial environmental impacts, while the reappearance of road projects raised concerns due to ambiguously defined mitigation strategies.

These cases underscore disparities in DNSH implementation across different funding frameworks, raising concerns about environmental impacts, adherence to standards, and transparency in decision-making processes. Addressing these inconsistencies is vital to ensure comprehensive and consistent adherence to the DNSH principle, promoting environmental sustainability and accountability in project implementation within Slovenia's strategic development programs.

2. Slovakia

The review of Slovakia's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Partnership Agreement (PA), and Operational Programmes from Q4 2021 to 2022 revealed several key points. There were collaborative efforts by numerous

associations and organizations to engage the Prime Minister for better public involvement in NRRP implementation. Concerns were raised about the inadequacy of certain allocations within the NRRP and OP (Operational Programme), particularly in relation to targets outlined in the 'Fit for 55 Package' and Renewable Energy Sources (RES) goals. Criticisms were directed at the insufficient criteria for building renovation, outdated climate policies, and potential risks in environmental and climate approaches.

The evaluation highlighted improvements in public involvement in the preparation of the new programming period but also pointed out issues regarding time constraints affecting detailed planning. Discrepancies between national priorities and regional strategies, lack of coordination, and potential loss of NGO input in numerous documents were identified as concerns.

Regarding the Taxonomy regulation, differing viewpoints existed, with some supporting nuclear energy as sustainable while others, including activists, contested this, considering nuclear and natural gas as unsustainable in the long run.

In Q3 2021, assessments of Partnership agreements on European structural and investment funds showcased positive aspects in public involvement but also highlighted issues with legislative and strategic contexts. For instance, despite positive aspects in the content, documents lacked alignment with national strategies, especially concerning the percentage of renewable energy sources.

Concerns persisted about the NRRP's public involvement, outdated climate policies, and inadequate milestones for climate protection. Issues regarding the renovation of buildings, especially the potential support for fossil natural gas, and the need for broader expert discussions on energy poverty solutions were also noted.



The organization's activities involved cooperation with other entities, advocacy for just transition solutions, seeking better public involvement in decision-making, and strategic media communication.

Conclusion:

The review underscores a mix of positive strides and persistent challenges within Slovakia's National Recovery and Resilience Plan(NRRP), Partnership Agreements, and Operational Programmes. While there have been commendable efforts to engage the public and various stakeholders, concerns exist regarding the adequacy of targets, alignment with climate goals, and transparent communication. The need for comprehensive reforms in legislative and strategic contexts, especially concerning climate policies, public involvement, and coordination among different levels of governance, remains crucial for effective and sustainable development in Slovakia.

3. Czech Republic

In summary, the analysis of the Czech Republic's Operational Programmes reveals several critical aspects affecting climate action, civic engagement, and sustainable energy strategies. Operational Programme for Technologies and Applications for Competitiveness (OPTAK) and Operational Programme Environment (OPŽP), while addressing various developmental areas, exhibit deficiencies and contentious points impacting effective climate contributions and environmental sustainability.

The lack of inclusive civic involvement during the preparation phase for the new programming period raises concerns about transparency and balanced representation. Moreover, while climate goals are emphasized in both programs,



the 'do no significant harm' principle lacks clear implementation guidelines, especially in OPTAK.

Renewable energy, particularly solar and wind power, faces negative portrayal in OPTAK, contrasting with its support for biomass and fossil gas. The absence of specific targets for renewables in OPŽP undermines the country's EU-wide renewable energy ambitions.

Biodiversity, pollution, and energy efficiency receive attention in OPŽP, yet funding and clear distinctions for these crucial issues remain insufficient. Both programs endorse biomass without stringent sustainability criteria, potentially causing environmental harm.

Preference for hydrogen and fossil gas over direct electrification in OPTAK, OPŽP, and the Czech recovery plan presents challenges for transitioning away from fossil fuels. Delayed legislation on energy communities impedes community-based renewable projects.

Key recommendations involve re-evaluating biomass allocations, enhancing biodiversity measures, setting specific renewable energy targets, advocating for stricter hydrogen sustainability criteria, expediting energy community legislation, and fostering civil society engagement in monitoring committees.

Addressing these issues through recommended modifications is crucial for aligning operational programs with EU climate objectives, enhancing environmental protection, and fostering sustainable energy transition in the Czech Republic.



4. Romania

The feedback on the SIDU (Integrated Urban Development Strategy) Târgu Mureş underscores the need for a holistic approach to urban development, stressing the significance of community engagement and a cohesive, integrated vision. It highlights the shortcomings of focusing solely on individual projects without considering their collective impact on the city's infrastructure and overall development. This fragmented approach has led to evident challenges such as traffic congestion and insufficient amenities alongside rapid residential construction.

The proposed development plan for the area between the Turbine Canal and the Mures River offers a strategic opportunity for planned expansion and enhancement. It advocates for a comprehensive strategy that includes the establishment of a central park, riverbank revitalization, pedestrian infrastructure, educational and recreational zones, cycle paths, and adaptive use of railway lines for improved local transit. Suggestions also encompass repurposing historical landmarks into museums and reimagining sports facilities to create a diverse and dynamic urban environment.

Furthermore, the recommendation emphasizes the adoption of Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) to address climate-related challenges. By incorporating NBS principles into urban design, the city can create multifunctional public spaces that serve recreational purposes, facilitate local commerce, and promote sustainable food systems through direct producer-consumer interactions. The proposal refers to a study on European NBS practices to offer valuable insights into effective urban development strategies.

Overall, the feedback provides a roadmap for comprehensive urban planning, emphasizing the importance of community involvement, integrated strategies,



and sustainable solutions to foster balanced and resilient city development in Târgu Mureş.

5. Bulgaria

The feedback on the draft Technical Assistance Programme (TAP) for 2021-2027 reveals insights into its alignment with climate and environmental policies. While acknowledging the TAP's support for enhancing fund management in Bulgaria, it underscores a limited explicit focus on climate-related aspects. Recognizing the challenges in tracking and overseeing environmental measures within EU-funded programs, the commentary highlights the need for strengthening the Management and Control System (MCS) to address these issues.

The commentary commends the TAP's acknowledgement of previous oversights concerning Bulgaria's NATURA 2000 network by Operational Programme Managing Authorities. It proposes the development of monitoring systems to evaluate the effects of measures on the National Priority Action Framework for Natura 2000 2021-2027 (NPAF) objectives and emphasizes improved collaboration with stakeholders.

However, the feedback identifies specific deficiencies and provides targeted recommendations:

- Lack of detailed information on climate-related activities, hindering an adequate assessment of their sufficiency and diversity within the TAP.
- Absence of explicit indicators to signify the TAP's contribution to climate and environmental policies.



- Inadequate breakdown of financial allocations toward meeting the climate and biodiversity targets set for 2021-2027.

To address these concerns, the recommendations propose:

- Explicit delineation of activities supporting climate objectives and QMS enhancements aligned with NPAF implementation within the TAP.
- Revision of output indicators in the TAP to clearly demonstrate the program's impact on climate and environmental policies.
- Provision of a comprehensive breakdown of financial allocations within the TAP specifically directed toward meeting the climate and biodiversity targets for the period 2021-2027.

In conclusion, the feedback underscores the need to enhance the TAP's specificity regarding climate-related actions, articulate clearer indicators, and provide detailed financial breakdowns. These improvements are crucial to ensuring the effective alignment of the TAP with Bulgaria's climate and environmental objectives in the forthcoming programming period.

6. Poland

In summary, the draft Regional Programme for Mazowze (2021-2027) outlines comprehensive objectives across eight key priorities to address development challenges. These encompass a wide spectrum of initiatives targeting competitiveness, sustainability, social well-being, vocational activity, education, integration, and citizen-centric development. Additionally, there are outlined priorities for technical assistance, financial plans, institutional frameworks,



partnerships, and communication strategies, although these elements are pending further completion.

The comments on the draft Regional Programme for Małopolska and Wielkopolskie include a diverse range of suggestions and amendments aimed at refining and aligning the proposed objectives with sustainable development and climate-resilient urban mobility goals.

These comments encompass suggestions for revising infrastructure investments, adding indicators for project evaluation, introducing educational components, reconsidering the use of financial instruments, and expanding target beneficiary groups. They underscore the importance of considering diverse perspectives, promoting sustainability, ensuring effective investment strategies, and fostering inclusive and impactful project implementation.

Overall, these comments provide insights and recommendations crucial for optimizing the Regional Programme frameworks to better address contemporary challenges and foster more resilient and sustainable development in the respective regions.

7. Hungary

The evaluations of various draft operational programs in Hungary regarding EU funds highlight significant concerns and recommendations, particularly focusing on environmental impact and compliance with EU regulations. These assessments collectively underscore the following key points:



1. Partnership Agreement on EU Funds:

The draft is criticized for lacking specificity, measurable targets, and a clear environmental vision.

Concerns include potential environmental degradation from rapid, publicly financed investments and conflicting goals.

Recommendations emphasize the need for measurable targets and compliance with EU regulations, proposing various amendments for decreased environmental impacts.

2. Hungarian Environmental and Energy Efficiency Operational Programme (KEHOP Plusz):

Shortcomings involve insufficient funds allocated to environmental improvement, lack of ambitious objectives, and priorities not aligned with nature conservation.

Recommendations call for ambitious objectives, sustainable practices, and directing resources towards environmentally beneficial activities.

3. Hungarian Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme (GINOP Plusz):

Critiques highlight a lack of comprehensive strategies, inadequate evidence-based analysis, and concerns about excessive reliance on EU funding.

Suggestions emphasize the need for evidence-based strategies, greater transparency in funding allocation, and deeper analysis of sector-specific issues.



4. Innovation and Entrepreneurship within Operational Programs:

Emphasizes the need for environmentally responsible entrepreneurship, suggesting various improvements in education, employment, tourism, and environmental assessment.

Calls for specific environmental goals within operational programs, clearer strategies, and addressing negative environmental trends.

5. Territorial and Settlement Development Operational Programme Plus:

Criticisms include the lack of specific measures, insufficient guidelines, and inadequate attention to environmental considerations.

Recommendations stress the importance of environmental protection measures, involvement of civil society, sustainability integration, and stricter guidelines for infrastructure projects.

In summary, the evaluations consistently advocate for more stringent adherence to environmental objectives, clearer strategies, better allocation of resources, and increased involvement of stakeholders in Hungary's developmental programs. They underline the necessity for these programs to align closely with EU regulations, prioritize sustainability, and address environmental concerns for a more robust and environmentally conscious approach to development.



Summary

The assessment of national Operational Programmes across Central Eastern European countries reveals several critical areas that demand attention and improvements for effective implementation. These evaluations underscore discrepancies, deficiencies, and key recommendations vital for aligning with European Union objectives and ensuring sustainable development.

In the case of Slovenia, they face DNSH Adherence Challenges:

Substantial shortcomings in DNSH application within Slovenia's OP and Recovery and Resilience Plans highlight inconsistencies, including deficient analyses in flood protection and reintroduction of road projects. Addressing these gaps is crucial for comprehensive adherence to the DNSH principle, ensuring environmental sustainability and transparent decision-making.

Slovakia also needs some strategic alternations: Slovakia's assessment identifies areas requiring immediate attention, stressing increased public participation, updated climate strategies, and alignment with EU objectives for effective implementation. Strategic changes are essential for successful execution.

The main problem in the case of Check Republic is deficiencies in climate action: critical aspects affecting climate action, civic engagement, and sustainable energy strategies are highlighted in Czech OPs. Recommendations emphasize inclusive civic involvement, clear DNSH guidelines, and re-evaluation of energy strategies to align with EU goals.

Romania needs some Holistic Urban Development: Romania underscores the need for a holistic approach to urban development, emphasizing community engagement, integrated strategies, and nature-based solutions for resilient and balanced city development in Târgu Mureş.



Bulgaria's Climate Policy Alignment: Bulgaria's Technical Assistance Programme (TAP) lacks detailed climate-focused information and financial breakdowns. Recommendations emphasize specific climate-related activities, clear indicators, and comprehensive financial allocations for better alignment with climate and environmental objectives.

Poland- refinement of regional programmes: The draft Regional Programmes outline comprehensive objectives but require refinement. Suggestions focus on sustainability, inclusive strategies, and effective investment frameworks for more resilient and sustainable development in respective regions.

Hungary- environmental compliance concerns: Evaluations highlight significant concerns regarding environmental impact and EU compliance across Hungarian operational programs. Recommendations stress the need for measurable targets, sustainable practices, clearer strategies, and increased stakeholder involvement to align with EU regulations and prioritize sustainability.

In conclusion, the assessments collectively advocate for stringent adherence to environmental objectives, clearer strategies, better resource allocation, and increased stakeholder engagement across CEE countries. These recommendations are crucial for aligning with EU regulations, prioritizing sustainability, and addressing environmental concerns for a more robust and environmentally conscious approach to development.



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