

4th Meeting of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region | 19-20 of September 2018 | Bratislava

19 September 2018

Welcome & Introduction

Welcome Branislav Ondruš, State Secretary, Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic.

The State Secretary of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, Mr. Branislav Ondruš opened the 4th Meeting of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region and welcomed the participants. This meeting was organized under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic as the managing authority for the Operational Programme of Human Resources together with Priority Area 9 (PA9) “People and Skills” and Priority Area 10 (PA10) “Institutional Capacities and Cooperation” of the Danube Strategy. The state secretary stressed that deeper regional cooperation of the countries with mutual aims and interests is a very effective way to achieve political and social goals. One of the main goals of the European Cohesion Policy is “Investing in Growth and Employment”, likewise this issue is supported by PA9 of the Danube Strategy – the partnership of countries linked by this special river. Priority Area 9 “Investing in People and Skills” deals with the key topics of education and training, labour market and marginalized groups. With the new programming period 2021-2027 a new proposal for ESF+ was published with the ambition to be a key instrument on the road to a more social Union. The new programming period opens many possibilities for improving cooperation. The whole region of the Danube Strategy is facing common challenges that require enhanced cooperation. And here is the space for joint transnational projects to help adjusting the regional differences and to provide citizens with the opportunity to develop their potential and skills as well as to strengthen their co-responsibility and responsibility for the region. The workshop therefore focus on experiences from transnational cooperation and projects under the current programming period as well as on the discussion of future transnational cooperation within the ESF+ and the perspectives for macro-regional development.

Mr. Michal Blaško, National Coordinator of the Danube Strategy in Slovakia welcomed the participants. Mr. Blaško appreciated the achievements made within the Danube Strategy (especially the functional network of national stakeholders relevant to Priority Areas, a lot of projects and initiatives as well as the information provided in many conferences and events within the Danube Region). As proposed in the EC regulations for the new programming period, macro-regional strategies would gain more power than in the current period. They would act as a leading light in regions addressed by macro-regional strategies by identifying the proper areas and fields for new investments including those provided by the EU Funds. He stressed many common challenges that states should tackle together. Mr. Blaško also reminded the revision of the Danube Strategy Action Plan. This exercise, together with the preparation of the new programming period are the additional key topics for us working within the Danube Strategy in the coming days and months.

Transnational Cooperation in the ESF

Macro-regional Strategies as Strategic Framework for ESIF

Anders Bergström, EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)

Mr. Anders Bergström presented the concept of Macro-Regional Strategies (MRS) and their potential to provide a political frame for transnational cooperation in order to effectively address the complex societal challenges we are currently facing. Today's societal challenges are more complex and cannot be solved solely on local, regional or national levels. Single projects are often not enough to solve the problems, we need the strategies. The effective transnational cooperation should involve stakeholders cross-sectorial and cross-borders. The Macro-Regional Strategies need long-term solutions not short-term projects. In Macro-Regional Strategies the macro-region is viewed as an interconnected system. The system of Macro-Regional Strategies as Strategic Framework for ESIF consists of **EU Commission** which is so called "the brain", **EU Programmes** as "the blood/energy" and **Macro-Regional strategies** as "the enactors". This should be the interconnected system. He identified the concept of flagships as a modus operandi, in which transnational teams are created and work together on defined challenges and topics.

Experiences from the ESF Transnational Platform

Toby Johnson, AEIDL

Mr. Toby Johnson introduced the ESF Transnational Platform – its composition and the network activities. The presentation reflected the experiences, lessons learnt, success factors and necessary framework conditions for transnational cooperation in the ESF. The ESF Transnational Platform helps European Social Fund users to work with partners in other countries. It provides a partner search database to find partners and build Transnational Cooperation Agreements. It also provides a space for networking and discussion forums. An emphasis is on good practice transfers and mutual learning. As a shortcoming he named the fact that MAs representatives are not policy specialists and therefore experts are needed and a strong co-ordination – also by bottom-up agenda-setting. At the same time he noted that there is no strategic framework for transnational cooperation within the current ESF and at the moment four different possibilities are discussed for ESF+. With regard to future prosperity, sufficient financial means for transnational cooperation should be put in place.

Question and Answers:

Questions were oriented on the role and possible support which can be obtained through the ESF transnational platform. Furthermore the suggestion of € 200 Mio for transnational cooperation within ESF+ was discussed quite controversial. It is to be feared that only "big player" will be the winner of transnational cooperation projects.

Perspectives on Transnational Cooperation in the ESF for macro-regional development

Activating Transnational Cooperation – Lessons learnt from the Danube Region

Irina Tsekova Ivanova, MA Bulgaria: First Experiences within Transnational Calls

Ms. Irina Tsekova Ivanova presented the experiences of successful transnational cooperation using the ESF funding in Bulgaria. HRD OP 2014 – 2020 Bulgaria has on own priority axe for transnational cooperation (PA4). All ESF thematic objectives are covered by PA4, the projects have to fulfil:

1. at least one partner from another EU Member State,
2. contribution to social innovation,
3. specific focus on the Danube Strategy (extra points).

The first call was launched in January 2017 with a deadline for submission in April 2017. 11 of 23 submitted project have been approved with 10 contracts for EUR 953.668. On the one hand, Bulgaria has found positive experiences while realizing a transnational call, on the other hand beneficiaries had to face some challenges like searching the right partners, no coordinated timing under the flexible approach or missing funding by the foreign partner (orphan projects). Thematically the projects focus on NEETs, Roma issue and administrative capacity.

Liliya Savkova Makaveeva, beneficiary

Ms. Liliya Savkova Makaveeva presented her experience as a promoter of the Transnational Cooperation Project “*Social innovations for a more efficient social inclusion of disadvantaged Roma women*” which lasts from October 2017 to December 2018. However the partnership between the Bulgarian *Integro* Association and *Mine* - International Network of Mother Centres for Empowerment in Germany started in 2006 – it was a well-known partner. The activities of the project were to explore and analyse two innovative projects in Germany and Belgium and to adapt them in Roma communities from three municipalities in Bulgaria to improve the social inclusion of Roma women, hereby improve their social and work skills and motivate them. Liliya Makaveeva appreciated the outcomes as number of Roma women applied to continue their education or started apprenticeship in hairdressing, pastry or tailoring. A challenge was that the expenditures of the partner organisation was not covered – here the MA Baden-Württemberg managed to provide additional funding. She also concluded that there is a shortage of skills, knowledge and working methods on local level for an effective Roma inclusion – therefore transnational cooperation could be a solution. Social innovative practices need long term support.

Question and Answers:

Participants were interested in the roles of both participating organisations and their involvement in the project. Questions have been asked also about the management of the whole transnational call and overall experience of BG managing authority with co-ordinated call. BG MA expressed their satisfaction as they received significant number of applications. Ms. Ivanova informed that priority was given to Bulgarian areas along the Danube river, because this region is one of the poorest in Bulgaria.

The Added Value of Transnational Cooperation – Lessons Learnt from the Baltic Sea Region

Agnieszka Osadnik, ESF MA Poland

Ms. Agnieszka Osadnik presented how transnational cooperation was implemented in the Baltic Sea Region. Poland is using ESF on both national and regional level, but only on the national level social innovation and transnational cooperation means are available. The focus is on the development of transnational cooperation through importing successful solution from other countries and the implementation of the transnational mobility programmes. The added value of the transnational cooperation is that TNC allows the exchange of ideas - accessing new ideas, sharing and discussing your own in a wider context. It brings mutual learning and possibility of working in the international environment and can bring the long lasting cooperation with partners afterwards – either within next projects or any other joint initiatives. On the other hand transnational partnerships needs time, dedication, flexibility, compromise, financial and human resources to be developed. However, good preparation, finding the right partners and coherent transnational work programme could be key factors of successful cooperation. As results of the cooperation with the Baltic Sea Network she mentioned information and mobilization seminars on TNC, partner search forums and the agreement on common themes for TNC under the common framework. She also highlighted the need for capacity building of MAs. She recommended that the EC should focus more on promoting social innovation and TNC.

Group Discussion – Future Possibilities for Transnational Cooperation

During the group discussion the take-aways of the meeting so far were discussed. Most of the participant stated that transnational cooperation is a benefit for all, but there are challenges for TNC in the future programming period. Some discussion points were:

- To support TNC at all levels
- To strengthen the capacity building of MAs
- Macro-regional strategies should be a support tool for transnational projects
- To support TNC within ESF+ is essential for a transfer of good practices

The Future of Transnational Cooperation in the ESF 2021-2027

Jader Cané, European Commission, DG Employment

Mr. Cané presented the state-of-play of ongoing discussion on the ESF+ 2021-2027 and possible perspectives for transnational cooperation post 2020. In TNC European Commission presented 2 strings:

1. Macro-strategies (via EaSI).
2. New idea of TNC which can operate together with existing MRS or separately (increased budget and encourage macro-regional strategies).

Jader Cané highlighted the mantra about the ESF+ which is the social dimension and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights into the praxis because investing in people is the only way to keep Europe's ability to compete. Improvement of socio-economic situation in EU requires political challenges and consequent overcoming of differences within the EU.

ESF+ should better respond to the needs of people in their life situations and introduce innovation in the field of social policies. The challenge for EU is to strengthen the interconnection of the EU Semester and the EU Pillar of Social Rights into ESF. Also the reduction of administration in favor of better conditions for applicants is a challenge and all this must be reflected in the preparation of macro-regional strategies.

The question of bottom-up and top down approaches in TCN raised a discussion. Mr. Cané stated that ESF+ will bring more help to lower administration, empower visible support for people. He mentioned the possibilities of coordinated calls, more freedom and indirect management. We have two ways to go – direct and indirect.

Question and Answers:

Agnieszka Osadnik: Is it possible to use TNC when implementing social innovations as a tool to implement the article 14? - This is mentioned in ESF regulation. What is the rule of TNC? Can MA also benefit from 200 M € budget for transnational cooperation?

As a respond to the questions rose at the meeting Mr. Cané has confirmed that DG EMPL understanding of TC in future is that EU-level support is complementary to other transnational cooperation activities carried out by Member States under their programmes as well as under other EU programmes. Although Member States would no longer be required to support transnational cooperation measures, they could still continue to fund transnational cooperation operations as in the current programming period. These activities would be complementary to EU-level support under direct or indirect management.

Jörg Mirtl, Interact: Update from the Interact programme

Mr. Mirtl gave an update and overview of the role of Interact in the funding period from 2021-2027. He presented 2 proposals from Interact Programme:

1. Proposal for a joint MRS platform on social issues including thematic coordinators dealing with social affairs European Commission (Regio, Empl), ESF platforms and agencies and institutes dealing with the ESF/social affairs (e.g. Cedefop, ETF, AEIDL, etc.)
2. Joint meeting innovative tools/embedding platform including OPs (MAs, JSs) that have applied such tools, macro-regional actors, EC. In conclusion Interact support alignment of funding to macro-regional strategies, Interact Capitalisation Network “Inclusive Growth”

Conference “Migration flows and integration policies” Interact with a potential focus on IJG programmes/transnational actions in the upcoming period

Shaping the Future of Transnational Cooperation

Barbara Willsberger, PA 9 and Claudia Singer, PA 10: Common topics to develop the Danube Region post 2020 (Linking the EUSDR (PA9 & PA10) to the ESF

Barbara Willsberger and Claudia Singer gave a short overview of the Danube Strategy. To strengthen the social cohesion in the Danube Region is one of the aims of PA9 and PA10. While the Danube Region Strategy provides a framework for cooperation across borders, identify the needs and dynamics of social policies in the region and provides a platform for dissemination/transfer of results, the ESF provides concrete resources for innovative ideas, increase the capacities of beneficiaries, facilitate to test ideas and produce tangible results. A deeper interconnection of ESF and the Danube Region Strategy would strengthen the social cohesion.

Priority Area 9 “Investing in People and Skills” deals with the key topics of education and training, labour market and marginalized groups. Targets, like Contribution to a higher employment rate in the Danube Region especially through tackling youth and long-term unemployment or increased quality and efficiency of education and labour market systems are close to the ESF. PA9 intensify the cooperation between ESF MAs and the Danube Strategy through coordination activities (like these MA network meetings) or through partner search forums for future calls etc.

The key issues of Priority Area 10 “Capacity building and Cooperation” are enhancing administrative capacities and strengthening participative governance. Actions of PA10 related to the ESF are for example to combat institutional capacity and public service related problems in the Danube Region or to ensure sufficient information flow and exchange at all levels. A relevant further action is to reviews bottlenecks relating to the low absorption rate of EU funds through setting financial programmes to support innovative ideas or to build capacities to implement projects in due time.

Matthias Boll and Holger Albrich, ESF Managing Authority Baden-Württemberg, Germany: Identification of possible common fields of transnational cooperation in OP plannings for 2021-2027

Part of the presentation was a letter which was sent by Mr. Boll to the European Commission with a couple of question concerning TNC in the drafts of the CPR and the ESF+ regulations (the letter and the answer are attached to the minutes). In the view of Mr. Boll and Mr. Albrich the answer of Andriana Sukova (e-mail from Sept 10th) raises more questions than answers (e.g. what are the criteria an innovative solution must fulfil to be eligible for ESF+ funding?). The details the Commission has given about TNC in the future are not yet sufficient for specific planning in the Member States. TNC for beneficiaries in the common funding priorities does not have to be designed as an obligation (“shall”), but can be a possibility “may”). We regard it as important that the OP does not have to be changed if TNC between beneficiaries in the end has not been realized to the expected extent.

Within the group of ESF-MAs in EUSDR Member States we want to find Member States who are interested in committing themselves to set up the possibility of transnational cooperation for beneficiaries in their OPs for the next ESF+ funding period. Our goal is to have

corresponding wordings in the OPs of those member states with a view to TNC in the common funding priority/priorities.

Group Discussion on Topics for the Future Transnational Cooperation in the ESF 2021-2027

Do you intend to implement TNC in your OP for 2021-2027? If yes, how?

BW	SK	HR	SI	BG	PL	AT	HU
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	-
maybe reference to EUSDR	If possible specific PA dedicated to TNC	Extra points in selection process	With implication of macro-regional policies/ strategies	If possible dedicated priority area or/and horizontally			
no TNC calls		Direct awards	Alignment of funds				
			Additional points				

What subject areas would be promising for TNC from the perspective of your Member State?

BW	SK	HR	SI	BG	PL	AT	HU
Part-time education	Youth employment	Lack of skilled workers due to emigration	Lifelong learning,	Employment (Youth, Long Term Unemployed, Elderly)	LLL	-	-
Training of health care assistants/assistant nurses	Long Term Unemployment	Integration of immigrants	Activation of elderly (increase of market-activity)	Social Economy	VET, Upskilling		
NEETS	Social economy	Ageing (services for elderly)	Labour mobility,	Roma Integration + other marginalized groups	Longterm Unemployed and disabled people		
	Inclusive education,	Protection of environment (green jobs, education)	Youth employment	Good working conditions, work-life-balance			
	Inclusive labour market						

Do you tend to a top down approach (implementing TNC as criteria in calls) or to a bottom-up approach?

BW	SK	HR	SI	BG	PL	AT	HU
Bottom up	Combination In case of policy requirements it would be the top down approach	Combination: Top down for direct awards Bottom Up for open calls	Most probably combination , but we would rather see bottom up	Both	Possibly both	-	-

Summary of the group discussion:

Mostly all the participating countries intend to implement the transnational cooperation in their OP 2021-2027, (participants from AT and HU did not have mandate to answer) either through a specific priority axis dedicated to TNC or horizontally, or in form of awarding the beneficiaries for using TNC.

The participants had identified many topics for potential transnational cooperation e.g *long term unemployment, youth unemployment, labor mobility, lack of skilled and staff* and many more but resonated with three subjects: **youth employment, long-term unemployment and activating of elderly people.**

In terms of approach to transnational calls (top-down or bottom –up) most of the countries prefer the combination of both approaches.

Conclusions and next steps

As it is visible from discussion groups, the countries have confirmed the need to continue and strengthen transnational cooperation, especially within macro-regional strategies because they are connected not only geographically but also via common topics. They face the same challenges (capacity building of MAs, intensify cooperation, exchange of good practices).

The next meeting will be held in spring 2019.