Executive Summary
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Mid-term performance evaluation
Interreg Baltic Sea Region 2021-2027 Programme

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Table of Content

1 Introduction 1
2 Methodology 1
3 The relevance of the 2021-2027 Programme objectives' thematic focus – continuation from 2014-2020 1
4 The relevance of the 2021-2027 Programme objectives' thematic focus – novel objectives 3
5 The 2021-2027 Programme facing geopolitical changes 6
6 Contribution to the EUSBSR Objectives 7
7 Participants in the 2021-2027 Programme 8
8 The long-term effects of the interventions from the previous Programme period (2014-2020) 10
9 The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Small projects 12
10 The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Focus on pilots and on testing of solutions 13
11 The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) 15
12 The support to the EUSBSR governance and communication and PAC's support to projects 17
13 The Programme implementation procedures and tools 20
14 The 2021-2027 Programme communication strategy and its implementation 22
15 General conclusions and recommendations 27

List of Evaluation Questions per Chapter

Evaluation Question	Chapter
EQ 1.1: Did the thematic focus of the selected projects change from the projects in Programme 2014-2020? If yes, how? How do the changes in the thematic focus correlate with new needs and changed political priorities in the EU and the Baltic Sea Region?	3
EQ 1.2: What is the added value of the 2021-2027 Programme compared to the 2014-2020 Programme in these topics? (refer for instance to the shifted thematic focus, to the different angle or approach to tackling a topic, to partnership and the main stakeholders engaged, to the type of project achievements and results)	3
EQ 1.3 For Programme objectives 1.1. and 1.2: How is the specific focus of the 2021-2027 Programme on communities and on social topics implemented through projects? What do projects achieve in these topics? What is characteristic of the way of addressing social topics in the Programme in comparison to projects within the European Social Fund (ESF)?	4
EQ 1.4 For Programme objective 1.1: In which contexts and from which angle did projects address the challenge of resilience?	4
EQ 1.5 For Programme objective 1.2: Which public services and for whom did projects focus on? How were the services (further) developed as more responsive?	4
EQ 1.6 For Programme objective 3.1: From which angle did projects address the challenge of circular economy? How did the projects differ from projects funded by the mainstream ERDF Programmes?	4
EQ 1.7 What is the interest of different types of organisations in the Programme objectives (including differences between countries)? Who are the main beneficiaries/target groups within the Programme objectives?	7
EQ 1.8 What can be concluded on the “Interreg niche” (e.g. public actor focus, increasing institutional capacity) and the Baltic Sea Region specificity of the cooperation topics?	4
EQ 1.9 Was the Programme flexible in reacting to the unexpected, changed geopolitical situation in the Region (ref. to Russia's aggression to Ukraine and the consequent sudden interruption of cooperation with Russia and Belarus)? How did the Programme react? How did the changed political situation affect the thematic focus of the projects?	5
EQ 1.10 To what extent, and how, do Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects contribute to the objectives of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)?	6
EQ 2.1 For the 2021-2027 Programme objectives, which represent a continuity to the 2014-2020 Programme (namely 2021-2027 Programme objectives 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3): What has been the durability after the 2014-2020 projects’ end, in terms of projects outputs and results including institutional capacities?	8
EQ 2.2 To what extent were outputs and results of projects from the 2014-2020 period considered and used in projects of 2021-2027? How were they used in projects of different Programme objectives (some examples)?	8
EQ 3.1 What is the performance of small projects compared to core projects (e.g. in which topics do small projects work well, and are there topics where they do not? What is distinctive about small projects’ achievements/results compared to core projects’ achievements/results?) How did small projects attract different types of organisations and newcomers compared to core projects?	9
EQ 3.2 Does the focus on pilots and on testing of solutions lead to more tangible results compared to 2014-2020 projects? Are the solutions tested and adjusted through pilots better usable for the addressed target groups, compared to the majority of outputs developed by 2014-2020 projects? In which way are pilots crucial for increasing the capacities of the target groups?	10
EQ 3.3 Which were the most effective mechanisms and practices of transfer and uptake of solutions? Did they differ depending on the target groups or thematic objective?	10

Evaluation Question	Chapter
EQ 3.4 How did the EUSBSR (mostly PACs) provide support to the implementation of Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects and transfer of project results to target groups? What did this support lead to?	12
EQ 3.5 How much has the use of SCOs reduced the administrative burden for the project partners related to project implementation (e.g. budget planning, reporting of costs, internal documentation, etc.)?	11
EQ 3.6 How effectively have SCOs accelerated the verification and payment processes compared to real cost reimbursement methods?	11
EQ 3.7 What challenges have arisen in using SCOs, and how can they be improved?	11
EQ 3.8 To what extent did the Programme, with its new project features, manage to attract newcomers, local public authorities and stakeholders representing civil society as project partners? Which project features made the Programme attractive for these organisations?	7
EQ 4.1 What is the efficiency and effectiveness of the project types for the EUSBSR support (PACs assistance, support to Strategy Point, organisation of the Strategy Forums)?	12
EQ 4.2 How did PACs support project idea generation? What is the effectiveness of the additional support to PACs for project idea generation and development?	12
EQ 5.1 Which main changes, made in the period 2021-2027 (compared to the 2014-2020) to application procedures as well as to content and financial reporting procedures, were the most significant for reducing the administrative burden for applicants and projects?	13
EQ 5.2 How did these adjustments lead to more efficient processes also for the MA/JS? What could still be improved to make the processes even lighter?	13
EQ 5.3 What are applicants' and projects' experiences in using BAMOS+ (e.g. for newcomers to the Programme, as well as for Lead Partners who already worked with BAMOS in the period 2014-2020)? What are the BAMOS+ features (during application and during reporting) that applicants and projects find most useful and user-friendly?	13
EQ 6.1 What is the influence of hosting project pages on the Programme portal on communicating the projects efficiently (in comparison to solutions from the previous Programme)?	14
EQ 6.2 Do the beneficiaries feel part of "Interreg family"? If yes, how does it show?	14
EQ 6.3 Are there lessons learned from projects' and Programme communication or needs for immediate improvements to address new/arising expectations from applicants and project partners? How did the projects cope with the mandatory visibility requirements? How did the support that the Programme provides to projects concerning the visibility requirements work for them?	14
EQ 6.4 Is the Programme communication effective in raising the awareness of decision-makers (national and/or EU levels) about the Programme (e.g. via project examples from the region)? For what do the decision-makers consider the Programme most useful?	14
EQ 6.5 How did PACs act as Programme multipliers, supporting the Programme and projects' communication? Which stakeholders did PAC's' activities as multipliers mainly reach out to? What were the most effective mechanisms that PACs used in communicating the Programme to its stakeholders?	14
EQ 6.6 How did national contact points contribute to the Programme communication in the countries where these existed?	14

1. Introduction

This document summarises the main report of the mid-term performance evaluation of the Interreg Baltic Sea Region 2021-2027 Programme (IBSR), conducted between December 2025 and September 2026. The purpose of the mid-term performance evaluation was to check on the Programme performance and draw evidence-based lessons that could be used in view of planning the next Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme for the period 2028-2034. The mid-term performance evaluation also analysed Programme implementation procedures/tools and implementation in the light of the first project results. A total of 31 evaluation questions (EQ) were defined in the Terms of Reference. The main evaluation report and also this Executive Summary are structured around the evaluation questions.

2. Methodology

The mid-term performance evaluation applied a mixed method approach with qualitative and quantitative methods for data analysis and evaluation. Different methods were used to collect data. In total, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted, five of them with the MA/JS, nine with national delegations, as well as three with EUSBSR stakeholders. Three web surveys were implemented to collect primary information from different stakeholder groups. The web survey to project partners/beneficiaries collected 335 responses and delivered important insights for most evaluation questions. Two smaller web surveys addressed EUSBSR stakeholder, namely EUSBSR PACs with 15 responses and the Baltic Sea Strategy Point with two responses. In addition, different analyses (e.g. qualitative project review, content analysis of projects, case studies, analysis of the partner organisation database) were conducted for this evaluation. In February 2026, the 2021-2027 Programme had approved 115 projects (77 core projects, 30 small projects and eight project platforms) allocating a large part of the Programme budget in the process. The evaluation analysed the situation of projects and partner organisations in February 2026.

3. The relevance of the 2021-2027 Programme objectives' thematic focus – continuation from 2014-2020

The Programme objectives (PO) that represent a continuity to the 2014-2020 Programme are: PO 2.1 Sustainable waters, PO 2.2 Blue economy, PO 3.2 Energy transition, and PO 3.3 Smart green mobility. The methodological approach featured qualitative content analysis of project descriptions for projects in both programming periods, as well as an additional comparison of key criteria. The focus of the analysis was on changes of the thematic focus and on added value of the new Programme compared to the past.

EQ 1.1: Did the thematic focus of the selected projects change from the projects in Programme 2014-2020? If yes, how? How do the changes in the thematic focus correlate with new needs and changed political priorities in the EU and the Baltic Sea Region?

The thematic focus of the selected projects changed from the projects in Programme 2014-2020. The analysis shows that a shift of the thematic focus towards addressing systemic threats can be observed. This shift is in line with new needs and changed political priorities (also described further below). An example is the modernisation of maritime infrastructure to ensure safety against external threats and satellite disruptions, which was not a primary focus in the previous programming period. Also in the field of energy this becomes especially visible. In 2021-2027, following the geopolitical ruptures of 2022,

energy is now treated more as a critical pillar of regional security. Projects focus on structural decoupling from external energy dependencies through circular planning and regional self-reliance.

A minor shift in focus between the two programming periods was driven, among others, by environmental threats that moved from being theoretical risks to measurable crises. Some 2021-2027 projects target specific environmental pressures. Thematic examples are in the fields of tourism, decarbonising of port operations through electrification and green transport chains. Also threats to the ecological balance of the Baltic Sea are now addressed.

New topics emerged within the previously addressed priorities, such as circularity, nature-based solutions, and advanced digital solutions. One emerging trend is the growing focus on reuse as a strategy to address environmental pressures and resource scarcity. This includes reuse in different contexts, such as new approaches to water retention, wastewater recovery, and the circular use of resources across different sectors and local contexts. In the field of energy, there has been a notable shift towards community-driven initiatives, with stronger citizen engagement in driving change and addressing the need for behavioural transformation at the local level. In the field of smart mobility, the current Programme integrates mobility with health and tourism resilience more deeply than the previous one. There is a shift from pilot-based infrastructural planning to systemic solutions, preparing the regulatory framework for new greener mobility solutions and towards user-centric and active inclusion of diverse user groups.

EQ 1.2: What is the added value of the 2021-2027 Programme compared to the 2014-2020 Programme in these topics? (refer for instance to the shifted thematic focus, to the different angle or approach to tackling a topic, to partnership and the main stakeholders engaged, to the type of project achievements and results)

2021-2027 projects bring added value to the thematic areas where there were already projects in 2014-2020. The current projects represent a leap in the sophistication of technical outputs compared to the 2014-2020 outputs (such as mobile apps and handbooks). Projects now utilise new technologies. Advanced digitalisation in most 2021-2027 projects connects scientific data and daily management practices. The shift is visible in the production of functional software and platforms.

As mentioned above, new topics and well-known 2014-2020 topics are now addressed with more ambitious and mature approaches. In additional innovative areas, the projects move beyond theoretical models by testing solutions in the field to prove their viability and create and spread operational knowledge, for example in the fields of wastewater treatment.

In some areas, maturity of approaches has led to more advanced and systemic projects. One example is the scaling of the Blue Bioeconomy, which aims for industrial symbiosis and commercial viability rather than proving concepts and implementing other early-stage approaches.

By addressing interconnected challenges, projects clearly show unified transnational action to strengthen the resilience of the entire Baltic Sea Region. For example, the topic of energy transition is addressed under PO 3.2 from many different angles, offering relevant lessons and practical entry points for local and regional authorities.

Partnerships in general have evolved from research-heavy consortia to inclusive ecosystems that encompass the full value chain. There is a stronger engagement of public authorities as project partners,

alongside communities that often play an active role in shaping the outcomes and contributing to the implementation of solutions on the ground. Especially private business partners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) /associations have more important roles. There is a stronger focus on co-creation through living labs and social innovation models which link public authorities with social initiatives.

4. The relevance of the 2021-2027 Programme objectives' thematic focus – novel objectives

The novel Programme objectives not present in 2014-2020 are IBSR 2021-2027 PO 1.1 resilient economies and communities, PO 1.2 responsive public services, and PO 3.1 circular economy. The focus was on analysing and systematising the projects, their specific topics and partnerships, highlighting the differences and added value compared to mainstream projects of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF).

EQ 1.3 For Programme objectives 1.1. and 1.2: How is the specific focus of the 2021-2027 Programme on communities and on social topics implemented through projects? What do projects achieve in these topics? What is characteristic of the way of addressing social topics in the Programme in comparison to projects within the European Social Fund (ESF)?

PO 1.1 can be understood as evolution of the smart specialisation approach towards innovation in society and economy. The project objectives reach from providing transformative solutions from a technical and entrepreneurial point of view to improving preparedness for crisis in society, public entities and SMEs. Some projects address the cultural and creative sectors as the most affected ones in a crisis, while other tackle specific needs of rural and remote areas and value chains in these territories. Finally, some projects address specific vulnerable groups and societies in general promoting key values such as democracy, integration or health.

Within PO 1.2 the specific focus of the 2021-2027 Programme on communities and social topics is implemented on the ground through a shifting paradigm in how public services are designed and delivered. Rather than addressing citizens as passive recipients of policies, projects actively integrate them as co-creators, address systemic health and digital inequities, and empower community-led organisations to solve complex local challenges.

In addressing these community and social challenges, the projects deliver concrete, practical achievements – ranging from digital applications and physical prototypes to transferable model programmes and policy toolkits. To build resilience, the projects employ several innovative methodologies, in particular co-design and participatory approaches, engaging young citizens, civil society, and stakeholders in the development of solutions, capacity building and training. Other projects use technological innovation, namely AI, VR/AR, DNA genotyping, and remote sensing to solve diagnostic, environmental, and educational problems.

While it is difficult to make a general comparison to ESF projects in national contexts due to their diversity, some reflections can be made on the distinctive features of IBSR projects. 2021-2027 IBSR projects under PO 1.1 differ from most ESF projects in their transnational structure, geographic focus, and multisectoral approach to resilience. PO 1.2 projects address social topics by a focus on transnational systemic innovation and the modernisation of public service delivery. While ESF projects typically focus on direct investment in human capital, such as individual training, employment services,

and on social inclusion within a single country, PO 1.1 and PO 1.2 Interreg projects have distinctive features, such as cross-sectoral cooperation and co-creation, systemic solutions also using technology for social problems, cross-border value chains, and capacity building for policymakers. IBSR projects usually involve high-level international bodies that do not typically lead national ESF projects, such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Secretariat of the Northern Dimension Partnership in Health and Social Well-being (NDPHS). These organisations provide direct access to national ministries across the entire region to ensure results are anchored in transnational policy. This is especially relevant for challenges that cannot be solved with conventional approaches at local level.

EQ 1.4 For Programme objective 1.1: In which contexts and from which angle did projects address the challenge of resilience?

The projects address resilience as a proactive process of transformation, learning, and innovation rather than a simple return to a pre-crisis state. They approach resilience from four angles: social cohesion and mental health, economic and sectoral vulnerability, solutions for territorial specificities and the use of technology for global challenges. Projects address a diverse range of societal and economic challenges stemming from the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the energy crisis, but also addressing vulnerable groups and territories. The initiatives address a wide array of concrete challenges, including supporting refugee integration, stabilising local food systems, and advancing digital healthcare through artificial intelligence.

The user-oriented focus on resilience instead of the input orientation on innovation, as in previous funding periods, has helped to improve the practical usability of projects. While some projects focus on strengthening technological solutions to existing challenges, others concentrate on very specific user groups (refugee women, refugee/traumatised children, employees with mental health problems, seniors, young citizens) or territories (rural areas, small municipalities, nature-based tourist destinations). All projects use innovative solutions and methods and some projects put the application of participatory methods in the centre to address resilience.

EQ 1.5 For Programme objective 1.2: Which public services and for whom did projects focus on? How were the services (further) developed as more responsive?

The projects are working with a diverse range of public services aimed at improving the quality of life, environmental resilience, and administrative efficiency. These services include health and social well-being services, environmental and infrastructure services, urban planning and design, library and information services, business and innovation support services, as well as efficient public administration and governance.

Many projects focus on improving the quality of life for specific segments of the population, such as patients and healthcare users, vulnerable populations (i.e. citizen groups with low digital health literacy, including the elderly and refugees), youth and students. For example, teenagers and students are primary targets for projects redesigning school environments, improving public meals, or enhancing digital literacy through hybrid library spaces. The general public is addressed in different ways, ranging from residents in certain territories such as small- and medium-sized cities, and populations affected by specific threats such as flooding or water pollution, to specific groups such as tourists.

Within PO 1.2 public services are further developed to be more responsive by shifting from conservative, 'top-down' models to participatory, user-centred, and digitally-integrated frameworks. This evolution focuses on involving citizens directly in the design process and utilising technology to meet specific social needs. Public services are developed to be more responsive through participatory and inclusive design, agile governance and innovation management, new feedback loops and cross-sectoral collaboration. Specific intermediaries and end-user groups are integrated directly into the project lifecycle to ensure that the final outputs meet actual societal needs. Small- and medium-sized municipalities are primary beneficiaries of these projects, as many are specifically designed to help smaller authorities. While large cities are also involved, it can be concluded that smaller cities can specifically benefit by becoming more attractive to residents and businesses.

The added value of these projects lies in their ability to provide personalised, evidence-based, and proactive solutions that usual services often lack, such as authenticity (tested under real-life conditions), real-time data connection, proactivity.

EQ 1.6 For Programme objective 3.1: From which angle did projects address the challenge of circular economy? How did the projects differ from projects funded by the mainstream ERDF Programmes?

IBSR Projects under PO 3.1 are dedicated to advancing the circular economy. Projects under PO 3.1 address circularity through four primary thematic pillars and diverse strategic angles designed to bridge the gap between policy and practice. A significant cluster of projects focuses on bioeconomy and biomass cycles as well as nutrient recycling. Some projects target sustainable food chains and circular agriculture. Industrial manufacturing with a circular approach addresses the recycling of complex industrial materials. One pillar targets the strategic levers held by public authorities, such as governance and public procurement. Some projects focus on deploying local circular economy strategies in specific urban areas (e.g. ports) or supporting circular lifestyles, education and action in local neighbourhoods. Projects address the transition to the circular economy from four different angles: reuse strategies and lifestyle, industrial symbiosis, behavioural change and mindset shifting, as well as standardisation and systemic integration.

Projects on circular economy funded by mainstream ERDF typically focus on direct regional investment, job creation, and infrastructure within a specific geographic territory, whereas IBSR projects always address complex challenges from a transnational perspective. While mainstream ERDF projects often focus on investments within a single region or country, IBSR projects often aim to influence transnational policy frameworks. This multi-level perspective is specific for Interreg projects within the ERDF. The projects funded under the IBSR Programme differ from mainstream ERDF projects also through their focus on joint solution development, transferability and regional scaling. Unlike mainstream ERDF projects that typically involve local partners, IBSR projects involve large and diverse consortia. As a diverse and relevant partnership reflecting the triple-helix (or even quadruple-helix approach) is a pre-condition, all IBSR projects also involve unique mixtures of different types of partners, facilitating innovation for truly new solutions and methods. This is not always the case for mainstream ERDF projects.

EQ 1.8 What can be concluded on the "Interreg niche" (e.g. public actor focus, increasing institutional capacity) and the Baltic Sea Region specificity of the cooperation topics?

The following findings and conclusions are based on the combined analysis of findings presented in chapters 3 and 4 of the main evaluation report, with inputs reflected in other chapters, in particular, chapters 7 and 14.

A major characteristic of the 2021–2027 Programme is its increased emphasis on enhancing the capacities of public institutions and governance systems. Projects increasingly move beyond knowledge generation and awareness-raising towards the operational implementation, testing, scaling and institutionalisation of solutions. Local, regional and national authorities constitute a substantial share of beneficiaries across priorities and appear to play an increasingly prominent role in Programme implementation.

The thematic focus of the projects reflects challenges that are particularly relevant to the Baltic Sea macro-region and often require transnational responses.

Following the geopolitical developments of 2022, projects increasingly frame security and self-reliance as regional challenges, focusing on reducing external dependencies and strengthening regional resilience. The Programme's resilience agenda is closely linked to regional realities.

Interreg enables actors to jointly develop solutions for problems that no single country or region can address effectively alone. A distinctive feature compared with mainstream ERDF and ESF Programmes is the Programme’s capacity to create transnational policy learning, connect local implementation with regional and national policymaking, influence macro-regional frameworks, support harmonisation and standardisation across countries.

Beneficiaries see that Interreg has a unique value in contributing to transnational networking and cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. In addition, 85% of the beneficiaries feel a strong positive effect of Interreg on their day-to-day work in the own organisation and country. For them, based on their open responses, the IBSR Programme serves as a catalyst for multi-level cooperation and knowledge transfer within countries. Furthermore, Interreg functions as a badge of quality, expanding professional networks and building strategic partnerships (see Chapter 14).

An important added value lies in the potential to address territorial specificities and specific needs of, for instance, metropolitan areas, rural areas, and small municipalities. This turns Interreg into a valuable Programme addressing territorial disparities across the Baltic Sea Region.

5. The 2021-2027 Programme facing geopolitical changes

One chapter of the evaluation analysed the question of how the Programme reacted to the geopolitical changes in the Region. The analysis included documentary review, the analysis of the thematic focus of IBSR projects, as well as the examination of beneficiary survey responses.

EQ 1.9 Was the Programme flexible in reacting to the unexpected, changed geopolitical situation in the Region (ref. to Russia's aggression to Ukraine and the consequent sudden interruption of cooperation with Russia and Belarus)? How did the Programme react? How did the changed political situation affect the thematic focus of the projects?

The IBSR Programme 2021-2027 responded flexibly and pragmatically to the profound geopolitical disruption caused by Russia’s war against Ukraine. It swiftly aligned with EU political decisions and

sanctions, stabilising project implementation through clear guidance and intensified support to beneficiaries. The Programme priorities remained relevant and adaptable to the emerging regional needs in the changed geopolitical situation, emphasising resilience preparedness, security and the energy transition. The Programme framework was flexible enough to respond to shifts of interests and political priorities according to the changes in geopolitical conditions and security.

The vast majority of beneficiaries in the survey (96% of 330 replies) found that their projects are still relevant, despite the geopolitical changes. In general, beneficiaries would not change anything on their project due to the changed geopolitical situation.

The analysis of thematic coverage of projects confirms that applications and projects after 2022 were able to respond to changed needs and political priorities. The evidence shows that the Programme's thematic priorities remain well-founded and forward-looking. Russia's aggression to Ukraine and the consequent geopolitical changes acted as a catalyst for reorienting project priorities towards a broader resilience agenda. The Programme addresses energy security, crisis preparedness, social cohesion, institutional capacity and regional self-reliance. The most visible shift occurred in the energy field (PO 3.2). Also under PO 2.2 (blue economy) there is an emerging emphasis on the use of digital solutions to strengthen the resilience, safety and continuity of navigation and maritime operations. Under PO 1.1, objectives expanded beyond innovation and economic competitiveness to include preparedness of public authorities, communities and SMEs for crises. Projects increasingly address the needs of vulnerable groups, including refugees, refugee women, traumatised children and communities affected by displacement and social disruption.

6. Contribution to the EUSBSR Objectives

The Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027 is closely linked to the EUSBSR. This link does not only regard the support to the governance of the EUSBSR through the dedicated priority 4, but also through the projects of the Programme contributing to the objectives of the EUSBSR.

EQ 1.10 To what extent, and how, do Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects contribute to the objectives of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)?

The Programme priorities/objectives are aligned with the EUSBSR. Furthermore, the EUSBSR Action Plan is a central reference for the Programme intervention logic. Consequently, it is not surprising that projects are strongly aligned with EUSBSR policy areas. Already at the application stage, IBSR projects are encouraged to consider possible EUSBSR contributions and plan their alignment, being requested to explain their contribution to concrete actions of the Action Plan of the EUSBSR. While there is thematic alignment by design, the actual project contribution to EUSBSR implementation varies across projects.

The project analysis shows that all PAs benefit from IBSR project contributions, showing a strong alignment of the objectives and a clear coherence. Cross-cutting Programme objectives under Priority 1, as well as projects under PO 2.1 contribute to eight different PAs. A strong alignment also emerges under Priority 3, indicating strong thematic coherence between PO 3.2 (Energy transition) and PA Energy, as well as between circular economy projects linked to PAs Bioeconomy and Innovation. Furthermore, Priority 2 has many diverse contribution links to the EUSBSR, in particular to PAs Hazards, Nutri, Safe, Tourism, Ship, Spatial Planning. Contribution is more centred from PO 3.3 on smart green

mobility towards PAs Transport, Tourism and Spatial Planning. PA Innovation benefits mostly from projects under POs 1.1, 1.2 and 3.1.

Contribution from IBSR projects to EUSBSR can take various forms. One mechanism of contribution is through involving EUSBSR PAC organisations as a partner or associated partners in projects. Another way is staying in contact with the EUSBSR PAC and contributing to their work of disseminating projects results, solutions. Popular forms of contribution are to participate in the EUSBSR Annual Forum, which includes concrete thematic workshops or sessions, or to present projects in EUSBSR steering/working groups.

Project platforms funded under Priority 4.1 usually show a very strong contribution to EUSBSR. They act as a bridge by offering collaboration across borders, sectors, and tiers of government. In this sense, they represent a valuable and effective tool to institutionalise the contribution of IBSR project to EUSBSR Policy Areas. This can be the support of PA work in one specific area, such as climate change adaptation of the PA Spatial Planning, cooperation for a joint product, such as a regenerative tourism hub of PA Tourism, or general PA support (e.g. PA Hazard and PA Ship) or direct work cooperation (e.g. PA Energy).

The high contribution level is also confirmed by beneficiaries, with about 60% replying that they have been in contact with one or various PACs before or during their application phase, 51% replied that they are in regular contact with at least one PAC and coordinate their project implementation and dissemination of results with them. In addition, about 41% replied that they are part of a project platform that is connected to a EUSBSR PA, while 22% replied that their project was designed in close coordination with a PAC.

The conclusion is that there is a considerable contribution to EUSBSR objectives and a mutual benefit connection between IBSR projects and the EUSBSR.

7. Participants in the 2021-2027 Programme

One section in the main report analysed the evaluation questions related to the participation of different types of organisations and the attraction of newcomers (see Evaluation Question below) in the 2021-2027 IBSR Programme. The corresponding chapter in the main report analysed the involvement of different types of organisations in the Programme across core, platform and small projects, as well as newcomer participation.

The analysis was based on data extracted on 5 February 2026 from the 2021-2027 programming period and is complemented, where relevant, by comparisons with the 2014-2020 period, beneficiary survey results and interviews with Programme bodies.

EQ 1.7 What is the interest of different types of organisations in the Programme objectives (including differences between countries)? Who are the main beneficiaries/target groups within the Programme objectives?

The analysis of organisation types highlights that public authorities (local, regional and national) stand out as the largest beneficiary group, representing 26% (304 beneficiaries) of all beneficiaries. Higher education and research institutions follow, accounting for 25% (290 beneficiaries). NGOs (160

beneficiaries) and business support organisations (135 beneficiaries) further reinforce the Programme's delivery-oriented profile.

Country-level differences reveal distinct participation patterns. Local and regional public authorities are especially prominent in Latvia, Sweden and Finland. Higher education and research institutions are particularly represented in Finland, Poland, Estonia and Sweden. Lithuania stands out for the strong participation of business support organisations, while Germany shows the most diversified participation profile, combining substantial involvement of research institutions, public authorities, NGOs, SMEs and business support organisations.

Important differences emerge across Programme objectives. PO 1.1 shows a relatively balanced and diversified participation structure, with strong involvement of higher education and research institutions, business support organisations, NGOs and public authorities. PO 1.2 is more strongly centred on public-sector actors, particularly local and regional public authorities.

PO 2.1 sees a strong presence of higher education and research institutions, reflecting the knowledge-intensive nature of sustainable water interventions, while PO 2.2 presents a more diversified and market-oriented composition, with stronger participation of national public authorities, SMEs and business support organisations.

PO 3.1 records the most diversified participation profile, with a relatively balanced presence of higher education and research institutions, local and regional public authorities, NGOs, as well as SMEs and business support organisations. By contrast, PO 3.2 shows the strongest concentration of local and regional public authorities, while business support organisations, higher education and research institutions, and sectoral agencies also play a relevant role. PO 3.3 is primarily characterised by the participation of local and regional public authorities and higher education and research institutions.

PO 4.1 (project platforms) involves a smaller number of organisations and is primarily composed of higher education and research institutions, NGOs and public authorities.

EQ 3.8 To what extent did the Programme, with its new project features, manage to attract newcomers, local public authorities and stakeholders representing civil society as project partners? Which project features made the Programme attractive for these organisations?

The analysis indicates that more than half of beneficiaries across all project types (66%) are newcomers in the sense of the applied definition.[1]

From a geographical perspective, newcomers are distributed across all Programme countries, suggesting that organisational renewal is widespread across the Programme area rather than concentrated in a limited number of countries.

The Programme managed to attract all types of organisations among the newcomers. Similar to the overall participation of different beneficiaries, local and regional public authorities (24% of newcomers) and higher education and research institutions (20% of newcomers) are the dominant groups. However, also stakeholders representing the civil society as project partners, such as NGOS (11%) and interest groups (3% of newcomers) could be attracted to a certain degree.

[1] In the context of this analysis, a beneficiary is considered a newcomer if no participation in the 2014-2020 Programme could be identified for the same organisation (for higher education institutions and public authorities, this refers to the level of the specific department, faculty or administrative unit).

The feature of small projects contributed to diversifying the profile of organisations attracted. The analysis suggests that they have facilitated the participation of local and regional public authorities, NGOs and SMEs in several Programme objectives.

8. The long-term effects of the interventions from the previous Programme period (2014-2020)

The analysis on long-term effects was based on case studies on projects from the 2014-2020 BSR Programme in different thematic fields. The analysis examined insights from all six thematic fields and included a comparison across case studies to find similar patterns and draw general conclusions. In addition, the survey asked 2021-2027 beneficiaries, specifically those who had already participated in the 2014-2020 programme, how the outputs and results of their past projects had been used since then.

EQ 2.1 For the 2021-2027 Programme objectives, which represent a continuity to the 2014-2020 Programme (namely 2021-2027 Programme objectives 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3): What has been the durability after the 2014-2020 projects' end, in terms of projects outputs and results including institutional capacities?

The case study analysis demonstrated that project results have significant durability, driving lasting local and regional policy impacts by being actively reused after their official lifecycle ends. Long-term impact is achieved through cumulative learning and gradual scaling across successive projects. The case studies showcase how project result of 2014-2020 projects (in the thematic fields of 2021-2027 POs 1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3) have been used and how they have leveraged further action and impact. Beneficiary survey data reveals that the vast majority of participants successfully used past project results in their region and in the current work. There is a wealth of examples how project results have been used after the project life a) forming the basis of follow-up or spin-off projects that deepen or extend the original scope, b) inspiring integration in routines and peer adoption when outputs were built into the ongoing work of former project partners and their networks, and c) allowing policy embedding in broader policy processes and external spillover use by third-party actors.

Durability of 2014-2020 project results is considerable. The analysis shows that 2014-2020 BSR projects have generated substantial and lasting impacts, particularly where results were translated into practical tools, commercial products or institutional practices linked to policy frameworks.

Examples for durability are:

- The results generated by the **CWPharma** project directly influenced multi-million-euro investments in advanced treatment plants in cities such as Berlin, Linköping, and Kalundborg.
- Digital performance monitoring solutions developed and piloted during **ECOPRODIGI** and **EXOPRODIGI** have been further developed and integrated into the product portfolios of major maritime technology providers.
- In Växjö (SE), **SUMBA's** commuting study and the Commuting Master Plan were fed into the municipality's scheduled Transport Plan renewal, integrating them into a formal planning document. The SUMBA+ circulation plan led to summer street implementations ongoing since 2024.

- In Hamburg-Altona (DE), a neighbourhood forum established through **SUMBA's** cooperative process continues to operate at technical and political level beyond the project's end.
- **BalticLINes** contributed to capacity building and institutional cooperation. the project's results have also been adopted in EU-level initiatives funded under EMFAF, including the Maritime Spatial Planning Assistance Mechanism, which is supported by DG MARE.
- The **Healthy Boost** model for cross-sectoral cooperation has been integrated into the long-term urban health policies of cities like Tartu, Jelgava, Turku and Poznan. Furthermore, its outputs are cited as a blueprint for the "Health in All Policies" (HiAP) movement and have influenced the development of flagship platforms within the EUSBSR.
- The UNESCO Policy Monitoring Platform features the **UrbCulturalPlanning** toolkit as a "proven method for urban social innovation," making it a global reference for city planners in the Creative Cities Network far beyond Europe.
- Finland amended its energy legislation in early 2026 to permit electricity sharing across land parcel boundaries without a licensed network operator – removing a key structural barrier to community energy. **Co2mmunity** partners, engaged in sustained advocacy on this issue from the project period onwards, communicating the barrier to members of parliament and ministry officials.

Key success factors durability and reuse have been, for example, the alignment with ongoing policy reform processes, combination of infrastructure, operational practice and governance, and policy advocacy. Operational solutions in practice are more effective than written guidance alone in triggering investment decisions, embedding results in organisations. Furthermore, institutional anchoring and routine integration help to increase durability, as well as durable knowledge platforms, and knowledge accumulation across successive projects. The findings point to a pattern in which long-term impact is achieved through cumulative learning and gradual scaling rather than direct replication.

EQ 2.2 To what extent were outputs and results of projects from the 2014-2020 period considered and used in projects of 2021-2027? How were they used in projects of different Programme objectives (some examples)?

2014-2020 project results have been widely used in 2021-2027 IBSR projects, as shown by the comparative analysis of case studies. The analysis indicates that the most successful instances of uptake occurred when project outputs were integrated into permanent governance structures or aligned with emerging regulatory requirements.

Beneficiary survey responses reveal a high share of confirmative replies to positive effects on local and regional policy-making in the project partner region. For example, 85% of the responses (n=128) confirm that "*the 2014-2020 project fed into the development of new tools, guidelines etc. in our area/region*", at least partially. 70% of respondents indicate, at least partially, that they "*used the 2014-2020 outputs and results in another (yet related) thematic field*". 79% of respondents confirm, at least partially, that "*the 2014-2020 project outputs and results influenced positively local/regional policy making in our area*".

In several fields, specific tools developed in the previous period are currently operational or serve as the direct technical foundation for new projects. Several current projects used successful technical outputs from the 2014-2020 period as direct launchpads.

Evidence shows concrete examples illustrated by the survey findings and qualitative patterns on use of 2014-2020 project results in 2021-2027 projects:

- The foundational senior-focused designs from BaltSe@nioR & BaltSe@nioR 2.0 now serve as active reference points for next-generation initiatives like the SmartAging and KidsLikeUs projects.
- The AdvIQwater project builds on the technological and methodological framework established by CWPharma.
- Current projects like Baltic Sea e-Nav and MaDaMe share the underlying logic of digitalisation and data-driven decision-making from ECOPRODIGI.
- StartSun and Enercracy explicitly carry forward the RENCOP model (originally established by Co2mmunity and Energize Co2mmunity) to continue engaging citizens in local energy communities.

9. The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Small projects

As of February 2026, there were 30 small projects in the IBSR 2021-2027 Programme, covering 17 finalised projects from Call 1 and 13 Call 2 projects. In March 2026, a further 28 projects were selected for funding. These have not been fully analysed in the context of this evaluation. By February 2026, the first 17 small projects had been finalised.

EQ 3.1 What is the performance of small projects compared to core projects (e.g. in which topics do small projects work well, and are there topics where they do not? What is distinctive about small projects' achievements/results compared to core projects' achievements/results?) How did small projects attract different types of organisations and newcomers compared to core projects?

Small projects cover all Programme objectives. From the perspective of the number of projects per PO, small projects work well in all topics. However, there are more under POs 1.1 and 3.1, with less small projects under POs 2.2 and 3.3. Analysis of outputs and solutions from small projects follows a typology, which is not so different compared to the solutions produced by core projects. Comparing the performance of small and core projects requires some caution, as the two types of projects normally differ in size, scope or depth. Small projects have shorter lifespans and many of them are already completed or advanced in their implementation and often focus on outputs that can be delivered relatively quickly.

Small projects have the capacity to deliver tangible and practical outputs corresponding to their budget and duration. The projects frequently generate toolkits, guidelines, roadmaps, training materials and other operational outputs that support stakeholders in implementing new practices. Performance of small projects is satisfying. In February 2026, small projects of the first two calls had already reached between 68% and 119% of their target values across the five considered indicators.

Comparison with core projects in terms of achievements is difficult, as many core projects are still under implementation with 17 small projects already finalised. Also, the type of project is too different for a simple comparison. For the indicators that also small projects have to use, the planned performance is much higher for core projects, which is of course logical given that small projects are shorter and smaller

in size. Where one small project involves on average 12.9 organisations cooperating across borders, a core project plans to involve on average 26.2. One small project aims on average to increase capacities in 37.1 organisations, while core projects would do so in 74.6 organisations.

Regarding partner organisations, small projects provide a somewhat more accessible entry point for organisations that are new to the Programme, including organisations such as NGOs, interest groups and local public authorities. The evidence does not indicate a clear shift in participation towards significantly smaller actors such as NGOs or civil society organisations. At the same time, there was a strong interest from these types of organisations (NGOs and local public authorities) in small projects. The analysis suggests that certain Programme objectives, especially PO 1.2, 3.1 and 3.3, were more effective than others in attracting local and regional public authorities and civil society organisations. However, as can be seen by the high rate of failed applications, in particular smaller organisations face challenges presenting successful applications. Overall, small projects broaden participation to some extent but remain strongly used by organisations that already have experience with transnational cooperation.

One of the advantages of small projects is their simplified administrative framework compared to core projects. While the smaller scale and shorter duration, in addition to the use of simplified cost options (SCOs) for all cost categories, can indeed reduce complexity, interview and survey results indicate that Interreg administrative and financial requirements still present barriers for potential participants (i.e. general administrative requirements, not specific to IBSR).

Small projects are diverse in terms of their achievements and beneficiaries apply for them for a variety of reasons. This diversity is seen as a strength in line with the programme's flexibility. As small projects receive sufficient applications and achieve their targets, this diversity is a useful complement to the core projects. Core projects remain better suited to broader systemic agendas, stronger policy leverage and longer-term interventions. The two instruments therefore appear less as substitutes and more as complementary formats.

10. The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Focus on pilots and on testing of solutions

A dedicated case study was conducted to examine the Programme's 2021-2027 focus on developing and testing tangible solutions through practical pilots. It covered qualitative project analysis and the analysis of responses from the beneficiary survey. Given the mandatory intervention logic for core projects, the study focuses particularly on this type of project. However, contributions from small projects were also included in the analysis, as they partially applied the approach of pilots and solutions.

EQ 3.2 Does the focus on pilots and on testing of solutions lead to more tangible results compared to 2014-2020 projects? Are the solutions tested and adjusted through pilots better usable for the addressed target groups, compared to the majority of outputs developed by 2014-2020 projects? In which way are pilots crucial for increasing the capacities of the target groups?

In 2021–2027, the Programme frames core projects around a sequence of preparing solutions, piloting and evaluating them, and then transferring them. Small projects are encouraged to develop practical and durable outputs and solutions for identified challenges in the region. However, unlike core projects, developing a full solution is not strictly obligatory.

The shift in the Interreg Baltic Sea Region 2021–2027 Programme towards a focus on solutions and pilots is generally perceived as leading to tangible and usable results. Approximately 89% of beneficiaries who responded to this survey question (n=317) believe that pilots produce solutions that are usable for target groups, with 45% finding them "very usable". Beneficiaries report that pilots are essential because they allow target groups to experience a solution in practice rather than just reading about it. This makes the results more credible and easier to adopt.

There is a strong consensus among MC members that the increased emphasis on piloting and testing solutions, as well as their implementation, is one of the most defining and positively perceived changes to the 2021-2027 Programme. Interviewees generally agreed that the shift from knowledge exchange to more concrete, solution-oriented projects had strengthened the Programme's credibility, resulting in projects with more tangible and communicable outcomes.

In general, it can be concluded that project results and solutions from 2021-2027 projects are more tangible and usable than in 20214-2020 because they are explicitly structured to be tested and refined in real-world conditions. The current approach requires identifying target-group needs before applying, whereas earlier projects often used the first phase of the project for basic analysis. This ensures the final solution is tailored to actual end-user capacities from the start.

Projects address with their pilots a diverse array of target groups across the public and private sectors, focusing on bridging the gap between conceptual innovation and practical implementation. Through pilots IBSR projects transform concepts, models and methodologies into practical organisational and technical capacities, enabling target groups to move from ad-hoc responses to documented, repeatable, and tested practices. To increase the capacities of various target groups, the projects utilise a range of training and knowledge transfer methods, technical instruments, organisational methods, and regulatory frameworks. Engaging target groups ensures that new methods do not remain one-off project results. This "institutionalisation" ensures that the capacity to innovate remains within the organisation long after the pilot concludes. Pilots provide a "safe space" for target groups to gain experience with emerging technologies. Pilots help convert spontaneous or ad-hoc responses into documented, durable processes and shared coordination frameworks.

EQ 3.3 Which were the most effective mechanisms and practices of transfer and uptake of solutions? Did they differ depending on the target groups or thematic objective?

Projects use different mechanisms and practices of transfer and uptake of solutions. Projects often use participatory workshops and focus groups involving specific end-users. Testing solutions in real institutions or business environments allows stakeholders to evaluate applicability within their own contexts. Physical demonstrations, study visits, and "storytelling events" are relevant activities. Full simulation tests or specialised testbeds provide technical data necessary for industrial-scale uptake. Working with multipliers, as well as using videos, multilingual materials, and digital platforms help tailor messages to different stakeholders and increase visibility. Public procurement is an effective mechanism to steer environmental and social performance at a strategic level.

While the mechanisms for the transfer and uptake of solutions were largely consistent throughout the programme, specific patterns and variations emerged depending on the type of intervention performed. Governance and social projects tended to produce "softer" outputs, such as methodological frameworks or participatory action. Mechanisms for transfer were mostly linked to training schemes. Technical and

environmental projects focused more on pilots applying new technologies and experimental methods. In this case, physical demonstrations, monitoring of results of experimental methods or processes and study visits are the most relevant mechanisms. Projects in complex domains and addressing new value chains address combinations of target groups or rather “ecosystems” of target groups. Here, primary transfer mechanisms are cross-actor coordination, operational models, Decision Support Systems, cooperation protocols and regional innovation/competence hubs.

Transfer approaches are tailored to the specific needs and capacities of the target groups. For NGOs and local and regional public authorities, peer-to-peer learning and social proof are particularly effective, complemented by manuals, training, dedicated platforms and accessible digital planning tools. For SMEs and business organisations, transfer focuses on practical and easily adoptable solutions, supported by digital platforms, technical validation, economic feasibility assessments and plug-and-play models that minimise the need for extensive R&D. Larger enterprises and infrastructure or service providers typically engage more strategically, integrating solutions into their own R&D and innovation activities and testing them through regulatory sandboxes, testbeds, pilot sites and simulations. Wider transfer is then supported through thematic networks, multipliers and the presentation of successful pilots at national and EU-level events.

11. The 2021-2027 Programme new features – Simplified Cost Options (SCOs)

One chapter of the evaluation analysed the use of simplified cost options (SCOs) in the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027. A dedicated thematic case study was conducted to assess the uptake and practical application of SCOs in the 2021-2027 programming period. The case study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis to capture both programme-level practices and beneficiary experiences

EQ 3.5 How much has the use of SCOs reduced the administrative burden for the project partners related to project implementation (e.g. budget planning, reporting of costs, internal documentation, etc.)?

The Programme demonstrates a high level of maturity in the use of SCOs, with clear benefits in terms of simplification, efficiency and focus on results throughout the project cycle. This positive assessment is confirmed across all sources consulted – including Programme documentation, beneficiary surveys, and interviews with the MA/JS and MC.

The use of SCOs has substantially reduced the administrative burden for project partners throughout the project cycle. The Programme makes extensive use of SCOs, covering 82% of the total Programme budget allocated to projects as of February 2026. Small projects, project platforms and strategy governance projects rely exclusively on SCOs, while core projects combine SCOs with limited use of real costs for selected expenditure categories.

Evidence from interviews, Programme data and beneficiary surveys consistently indicates that SCOs simplified budget planning, financial reporting and compliance with Programme rules. According to the beneficiary survey conducted in March 2026 (335 respondents), 81% of respondents agreed that SCOs reduced the administrative burden during the application phase, notably through reduced documentation requirements, simpler budgeting and fewer detailed calculations. In addition, 76% reported this allowed an increased focus on project content and results, while 75% considered that SCOs improved the clarity and predictability of eligibility rules.

During implementation, 80% of respondents agreed that SCOs reduced the administrative burden associated with financial reporting, particularly through lower documentation requirements and simplified procedures. Beneficiaries highlighted significant time savings and reduced bureaucracy, allowing greater focus on project implementation and delivery. Simplification was particularly strong for projects fully implemented through SCOs, where reporting requirements are largely limited to staff-related documentation and flat rates without supporting invoices.

Administrative burden was further reduced through transferring the verification of SCO-covered expenditure to the MA/JS. Project partners in countries with decentralised first-level control systems no longer need to appoint and pay national controllers for SCO-based expenditure, generating substantial cost savings and reducing administrative effort. The estimated budget allocated by projects to national controls decreased by approximately 84%, from EUR 8.2 million in 2014–2020 to EUR 1.3 million in 2021–2027. Beneficiaries identified this as a major advantage of the new system.

EQ 3.6 How effectively have SCOs accelerated the verification and payment processes compared to real cost reimbursement methods?

The use of SCOs has significantly accelerated both verification and payment processes compared to the previous programming period and traditional real-cost reimbursement methods.

According to an analysis carried out by the MA/JS in March 2026, the average time required for projects to submit progress reports decreased by approximately 66%, from 114 days in 2014-2020 to 38 days in 2021-2027. This improvement is linked to the wider use of SCOs, simplified reporting requirements, reduced supporting documentation, and the centralisation of SCO verification at MA/JS level, while national controllers now focus only on real-cost expenditure.

Payment timelines also improved substantially. The average time between the end of the reporting period and reimbursement decreased by around 44%, from 195 days in the previous programming period to 111 days in the current one. More flexible reporting arrangements also contributed to faster reimbursements, as SCO-based expenditure must be reported regularly while real-cost expenditure – representing only a minor share of total costs – can be consolidated and reported less frequently.

Survey results confirm these findings, although perceptions regarding reimbursement speed are somewhat more moderate than the quantitative evidence suggests. Around 65% of beneficiaries reported that SCOs improved the speed of reimbursements. Returning beneficiaries and LP reported more positive perceptions than newcomers and project partners, likely reflecting their greater familiarity with Programme procedures and financial management.

EQ 3.7 What challenges have arisen in using SCOs, and how can they be improved?

The use of SCOs is generally functioning well and has substantially reduced administrative burden, but some minor challenges merit attention, particularly when designing arrangements for 2028-2034. A key issue is ensuring that unit costs remain representative of actual expenditure over time. Standard hourly rates are currently broadly aligned with actual costs, but inflation and changing labour costs could gradually weaken this alignment. Further challenges concern the design of travel flat rates and remaining reporting requirements. While the 15% travel and accommodation flat rate is highly appreciated by beneficiaries, linking it to staff costs may create inequalities. Reflection might be needed

to see how these challenges can be addressed, for example through periodic reviews or a structured adjustment mechanism linked to relevant economic indicators. For 2028-2034, continued monitoring could be appropriate.

Further practical simplification could be achieved by reducing the level of detail required in timesheets and providing clearer guidance on calculating and reporting annual working hours.

12. The support to the EUSBSR governance and communication and PAC's support to projects

The IBSR 2021-2027 Programme supports the EUSBSR governance and communication under PO 4.2. The analysis included a review of PO 4.2 projects, interviews to Programme bodies, analysis of responses to the survey to beneficiaries as well as on the input and perceptions gathered from EUSBSR PACs and the Baltic Sea Strategy Point via a survey and interviews. In the context of this evaluation, the efficiency of IBSR support for the EUSBSR is assessed in terms of whether the resources dedicated to the EUSBSR are spent efficiently, i.e. whether there is an adequate and reasonable relationship between results and resources. The effectiveness of IBSR support for the EUSBSR is assessed by determining the extent to which the expected results set out in the Programme Document for PO 4.2 have been achieved.

EQ 3.4 How did the EUSBSR (mostly PACs) provide support to the implementation of Interreg Baltic Sea Region projects and transfer of project results to target groups? What did this support lead to?

The analysis of PO 4.2 projects and activities shows that there is clear EUSBSR support to IBSR project implementation and transfer of results which is visible through two main channels. One is the EUSBSR Annual Forum where numerous IBSR projects and project platforms participate with stands for relevant EUSBSR Policy Areas or with workshops or interactive sessions. The second is the support from EUSBSR PACs to project implementation, even if the intensity and scope of support vary from PAC to PAC and from project to project, depending on several factors.

The Monitoring Committee members interviewed generally agree that the EUSBSR and the Programme are closely linked and mutually beneficial. PAC performance is acknowledged as valuable but uneven. Approximately half of the MC members would like to see a clearer, more systematic uptake of project results in the PA of the EUSBSR, as well as more proactive idea generation from all PACs.

A majority of beneficiaries has close contact with EUSBSR PACs. About 51% of lead partner responses in the beneficiary survey (n=68) indicated that they are in regular contact with one or various PACs during project implementation. 82% of those lead partners who responded (n=39) found the support useful, with 51% thinking it was extremely useful. Beneficiary responses point to a range of tangible outcomes arising from cooperation with PACs, with dissemination and visibility emerging as the most consistently cited benefits. Projects describe gaining access to high-level events and forums, such as the EUSBSR Annual Forum, the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum, the European Health Forum Gastein or Maritime Days. There they can present results to audiences and decision-makers that they would not otherwise reach. Joint sessions, co-organised workshops and panel discussions are mentioned as concrete formats through which PAC cooperation has translated into broader outreach.

Beyond dissemination, several respondents point to outcomes with longer-term strategic significance. These include contributions to policy processes such as the revision of coastal spatial planning recommendations and land-use data harmonisation in the Baltic Sea Region as well as the strengthening of multi-level governance in relevant thematic areas. PACs facilitated connections to new partners and stakeholder networks. Cooperation also supported the development of platform projects and contributed to Action Plan updates, with one respondent describing the relationship as genuinely reciprocal – their platform serving as an operational tool for the PAC, while the PAC provided strategic direction in return.

There is evidence that PAC support sometimes goes clearly beyond dissemination and visibility, into supporting the pilot phase of projects and the transfer of results to target groups. During the capitalisation phase, most PACs frequently communicate project results to external stakeholders. Supporting knowledge transfer and solution testing is common but selective, with engagement varying by project. Several PAs have developed recurring formats that bring stakeholders and projects together regularly. For example, PA Ship organises a twice-yearly Operational Group meeting for all PA projects and invited speakers. The format has directly inspired new project ideas and action on green shipping corridors. The Baltic Sea PFAS Network (PA Hazards and part of the HAZGONE project platform) takes this further, convening stakeholders virtually every month thus generating a continuous flow of new connections and ideas among project representatives, national authorities, and universities.

All stakeholders confirm that IBSR projects and PACs benefit from a win-win relationship. While IBSR projects provide policy input, test solutions and generate ideas for new activities, PACs steer them towards EUSBSR objectives and embed their results in broader policy dialogues. Examples from several PAs (e.g. PA Secure and PA Tourism) describe how project results systematically feed into policy discussions, priority updates and new strategic initiatives, creating an evidence base that keeps the EUSBSR relevant and responsive.

The general conclusion is that there is valuable support to the implementation of IBSR projects and to the transfer of project results. Through EUSBSR PAC networks, results reach policymakers and stakeholders beyond project partnerships, increasing visibility and practical application. Projects gain access to high-level forums, contribute to policy processes, and strengthen multi-level governance with PACs sometimes even securing consortium continuity. PAC cooperation amplifies project impact, helping results travel further and embed more durably in regional policy and practice.

EQ 4.2 How did PACs support project idea generation? What is the effectiveness of the additional support to PACs for project idea generation and development?

The analysis of PO 4.2 projects and activities, the interviews to PACs and the analysis of responses to the beneficiary survey show that support to project idea generation within IBSR is one of the core activities of PACs. All PACs revise project ideas and sometimes get in touch with applicants.

Responses in the beneficiary survey indicate that 60% of lead partner organisations were in contact with one or various PACs before or during their application phase. About 70% (n=46) found the support useful, with 37% thinking it was extremely useful.

Beneficiaries who received support from EUSBSR PACs during the application process described this support in terms of meetings, written feedback on project ideas or application forms, and advice on work plans, project outlines, governance and networks, potential partners, operational issues and past

projects. A smaller number of respondents mentioned more hands-on contributions, such as sharing thematic expertise, providing substantive content input or even supplying physical materials relevant to the project's scope of research. Respondents highlighted that PACs shared lessons from previous funding calls and flagged issues with earlier projects in their Policy Area, using this knowledge to help applicants refine their proposals. Others described how PACs facilitated connections to relevant networks, validated the thematic relevance of project ideas and encouraged projects. In several cases, PACs joined consortia as associated or full partners, enabling sustained input throughout the project's development.

According to PACs, they receive a high number of project ideas and do not have time and resources to cooperate in-depth with all project ideas promotors and applicants. When PACs have time and identify relevant projects for their PA, they offer ad-hoc meetings, written support or other support via brainstorming sessions, application-writing workshops and shared online workspaces. For strategic projects from the perspective of the different Policy Areas, there is more thorough guidance during project idea generation and development.

The revision of PAC project generation activity and the generally positive feedback of beneficiaries lead to the conclusion that project idea support is highly effective and adds value to applications. The analysis shows that the intensity and number of applications supported by PACs differ, usually due to time constraints and limited resources. Even though the effectiveness of the PAC support to IBSR project idea generation is already high, it could be even more effective if PACs reached out actively and supported more applicants and organisations.

EQ 4.1 What is the efficiency and effectiveness of the project types for the EUSBSR support (PACs assistance, support to Strategy Point, organisation of the Strategy Forums)?

Support to PACs: This is the most important support in terms of resources. Work between PACs and IBSR is deemed as efficient and effective. The support creates value for money with a wide range of visible and tangible effects and benefits over many different thematic areas, covering all POs, over a long time period to IBSR projects, project idea generation and the overall IBSR Programme. The support allows to ensure in-depth preparation of and assistance to projects, personalised support to the dissemination and transfer of results, continued stakeholder engagement, communication to institutions and decision-makers in the Baltic Sea Region.

Support to the Baltic Strategy Point (BSP): The Strategy Point in itself is an important support to the EUSBSR governance, in particular to PACs and the National Coordinators, but also ensuring continuity and effectiveness of the EUSBSR governance. The work of BSP and thus its support is deemed useful to maintain the overall governance capacity and quality for the EUSBSR.

Support to the Strategy Forum: The IBSR support is rather small in terms of funding with less than 5% of projects under PO 4.2. It can be concluded that the Annual Forum is a very useful and relevant event that brings together IBSR projects, EUSBSR PA stakeholders and policymakers. Considering the analysis, the IBSR support is considered as effective and efficient.

A need to reflect on the general balance and depth of the IBSR support to the EUSBSR has been identified, considering the feedback of two-thirds of the MC delegations on the perceived need to shift responsibility for financing EUSBSR more firmly to Member States and mainstream programmes.

Despite the overall positive assessment, there are some challenges, such as uneven PAC performance across PACs, low visibility of PAC work within IBSR, lack of follow-up on general EUSBSR contributions to IBSR projects and project platforms, including long-term effects. The challenges might be difficult to tackle by the IBSR Programme but rather seen as a suggestion to reflect on them together with the EUSBSR governance.

Overall, it can be concluded that the current support model enables substantial positive synergy effects between the EUSBSR and the IBSR, namely the project platforms, the spill-over effects to other Baltic organisations and networks, the continuity of networks and the easy access to other funding Programmes. These positive effects add to the overall long-term effect and sustainability of project results analysed under EQ 1.10.

13. The Programme implementation procedures and tools

The Programme implements its projects through structured implementation procedures. One key tool in programme implementation is the online system BAMOS+. The analysis covered a review of administrative procedures, a service blueprint analysis, as well as the analysis of interviews to Programme bodies, and the beneficiary survey responses.

It has to be noted that several changes identified below as relevant for reducing administrative burden are more thoroughly analysed in dedicated chapters of the main report, e.g. the use of SCOs, the small projects and the focus on pilots and solutions.

EQ 5.1 Which main changes, made in the period 2021-2027 (compared to the 2014-2020) to application procedures as well as to content and financial reporting procedures, were the most significant for reducing the administrative burden for applicants and projects?

The introduction of SCOs has been the most significant change in the 2021–2027 period. It has sped up internal processes for the MA/JS and reduced administrative burden. Using SCOs has significantly streamlined the administrative lifecycle for projects. As thoroughly analysed under EQ 3.5, the use of SCOs has substantially reduced the administrative burden for project partners throughout the project cycle. Evidence from interviews, Programme data and beneficiary surveys consistently indicates that SCOs simplified budget planning, financial reporting and compliance with Programme rules.

The introduction of small projects simplified the application process for applicants and gave them the opportunity to apply for the Programme funding, exclusively using SCOs, which simplifies their reporting process, reducing the administrative burden.

Another major change was the adjustment of the intervention logic and the focus on pilots and solutions leading to a streamlined work package structure and changes on the content-related side of processes. While this is not being perceived as directly reducing the administrative burden for beneficiaries or applicants, evidence suggests that project results and solutions from 2021-2027 projects are more tangible and usable than in 2014-2020 because they are explicitly structured to be tested and refined in real-world conditions. This has an indirect effect on the perception of more valuable project results in relationship to the work and time dedicated to application and project implementation.

BAMOS+ ensures that there is an integrated system for electronic data exchange that covers application, reporting and communication in the 2021-2027 period. BAMOS+ introduced a number of

improvements, compared to BAMOS (2014-2020). The changes and their positive effects are widely appreciated and perceived positively by Programme bodies and beneficiaries.

EQ 5.2 How did these adjustments lead to more efficient processes also for the MA/JS? What could still be improved to make the processes even lighter?

The service blueprint analysis indicates that the Programme has established a coherent service delivery model in which digital tools, guidance and internal coordination are well interlinked and contribute to a smooth progress starting with the application towards implementation and reporting.

As mentioned already under EQ 3.6, the use of SCOs in 2021-2027 has generated significant efficiency gains and contributed substantially to administrative simplification. For example, the average time required for partners to submit progress reports decreased by around 66%, from 114 days in 2014-2020 to 38 days in the current period.

The MA/JS uses different tools to constantly improve administrative processes during Programme implementation. This leads to the early detection of inefficiencies and issues within the internal processes.

Potential for improvement has been detected with regard to BAMOS+. Slight improvements would further increase efficiency of processes within the MA/JS, for example by embedding the project idea form and its submissions into the BAMOS+ system, by using an automatic schedule for the consultations to reduce the time needed to plan them, and some technical changes related to the pdf forms in BAMOS+.

SCOs do not cover all cost categories of core projects, so it might be reflected on if and how the use of SCOs would be possible for other cost categories. However, it has to be noted that future processes depend on the 2028-2034 Interreg Regulations and how the use of SCOs and the performance-based approach will impact the internal operations.

In light of recent technological advancements, the utilisation of AI tools has the potential to enhance the efficiency of administrative processes. AI could support repetitive and documentation-intensive tasks. This could free up programme staff to focus on tasks requiring human judgement, such as assessing project quality, advising beneficiaries, and supporting effective implementation. It is suggested to explore the use of AI-based tools to automate routine screening and reporting tasks, while allowing programme staff to focus on qualitative tasks requiring expert judgement.

EQ 5.3 What are applicants' and projects' experiences in using BAMOS+ (e.g. for newcomers to the Programme, as well as for Lead Partners who already worked with BAMOS in the period 2014-2020)? What are the BAMOS+ features (during application and during reporting) that applicants and projects find most useful and user-friendly?

Programme survey evidence shows that BAMOS+ is perceived by the vast majority of beneficiaries as a valuable tool, with applicants finding the tool very helpful, intuitive, of high availability, stable, reliable and supportive. 79% of core project beneficiaries find it a valuable tool, 88% think that is has a high availability, 83% find it stable and reliable. The figures are even higher for small project beneficiaries (95%, 89% and 84%).

In terms of user experience, applicants and in particular newcomers to the Programme needed some time to familiarise with the structures. Lead partners already familiar with BAMOS (2014-2020) benefitted from the enhanced functionality. Once familiar, most applicants of both core and small projects received the tool well. The evaluation of specific features and functionalities within BAMOS+ is generally very positive. Support tools like the BAMOSwiki and the BAMOS Helpdesk are perceived as very useful.

Smaller technical improvements might further improve the usability of the tool, e.g. the possibility of printing/exporting reports in PDF or budget overviews in MS Excel, or to improve the Report of Hours and Employment Confirmation sheets with an automatic functionality of highlighting weekend days. Another aspect to improve would be the state aid checkbox design.

14. The 2021-2027 Programme communication strategy and its implementation

The final chapter in the main report covers a wide range of communication-related evaluation questions. The analysis covered the specific review of communication tools and activities, taking into account the interviews with Programme bodies as well as the responses to the beneficiary and PAC surveys.

EQ 6.1 What is the influence of hosting project pages on the Programme portal on communicating the projects efficiently (in comparison to solutions from the previous Programme)?

Hosting project pages centrally on the Programme portal has significantly improved the efficiency, coherence and sustainability of project communication compared to the decentralised website model used in the 2014-2020 programming period. Under the previous approach, individual project websites varied widely in structure, level of detail, and compliance with visibility requirements, leading to uneven quality, fragmented presentation of results, and limited long-term accessibility once projects ended.

Evidence from the beneficiary survey confirms the usefulness of the new approach. 82% of the beneficiaries who responded to this question (n=118) think it is more or even much more efficient to host all project pages on the Programme portal. Only 17% perceive it as less efficient. However, about one third of the beneficiaries who also provided an explanation felt that the standardised approach comes with trade-offs. Although the standard template is considered efficient and user-friendly, beneficiaries perceive limitations in terms of flexibility in website design, content structure and technical functionality. This makes it more difficult for projects to showcase their unique features or present specialised outputs.

The current model introduces a standardised framework for project communication, ensuring consistent branding, structure and minimum content across all projects. From an efficiency perspective, this reduces duplication of effort, as projects no longer need to develop and maintain independent websites and simplifies compliance with regulatory visibility requirements. Interviews confirm that this approach has led to savings in time and budget, reduced administrative burden, and to a consistent visual identity and communication standard across all projects.

In terms of effectiveness, centralised hosting has strengthened visibility, discoverability and long-term accessibility of results. Web analytics show that project pages are a major driver of overall website engagement, accounting for over two thirds of total users in both 2024 and 2025, with a growing share over time. This indicates that project-related content benefits from being embedded within the

Programme's main communication environment and reaches audiences beyond individual project partnerships.

Compared to the previous Programme, the current system improves capitalisation potential, as policy-makers and stakeholders can consult project outputs after project closure through a stable Programme maintained platform. Project pages also benefit from Programme-generated traffic, increasing the exposure of project content. Unlike project-specific websites, the current model provides a stable Programme-maintained repository of results that remains accessible beyond project closure. Overall, the shift to Programme hosted project pages represents a clear improvement in both efficiency and communication impact, addressing many of the structural weaknesses observed in the previous period.

EQ 6.2 Do the beneficiaries feel part of "Interreg family"? If yes, how does it show?

The notion of an 'Interreg family' becomes evident in the sense of ownership and value placed on Interreg participation, as well as in the recurring interactions, shared working practices and long-term cooperative relationships among beneficiaries. In this context, the Programme creates specific and unique conditions that facilitate exchange, mutual learning and repeated cooperation across projects and calls.

Evidence from interviews, surveys and observed participation patterns in events indicates that beneficiaries perceive a sense of belonging to Interreg, particularly at the implementation level. This sense of belonging appears to stem from a functional network based on trust, repeated cooperation and accumulated experience. Beneficiaries see that Interreg has a unique value in contributing to transnational networking and cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. However, 85% of the beneficiaries also feel a strong positive effect of Interreg on their day-to-day work in the own organisation and country. For them, based on their open responses, the IBSR Programme serves as a catalyst for multi-level cooperation and knowledge transfer within countries. Organisations act as innovation hubs, successfully bridging the gap between transnational expertise and local needs by sharing evidence-based tools with municipalities, regional agencies, and national ministries. These collaborations strengthen local capacity and elevate regional issues to the national policy agenda, fostering dialogue on critical topics like the circular economy and sustainable development.

Several mechanisms contribute to this perception. First, centralised communication structures – such as Programme hosted project pages, common visibility tools and shared communication guidelines – create a common operational framework, reinforcing a sense of collective identity. Second, community building instruments such as the matchmaking platform, thematic webinars and informal formats (notably the Forum for Communication Managers on Facebook) provide regular opportunities for project developers to connect with one another. Through these formats, participants exchange good practices, share information about events, and promote mutual learning, fostering continuity of interaction beyond individual projects. In addition, Programme events and external events such as the EUSBSR Annual Forum provide important opportunities for networking, trust-building and the development of long-term cooperation relationships across the Baltic Sea Region.

Interviews consistently highlight the particular role of small projects in fostering a sense of belonging to the Interreg community. They serve as entry points for newcomers, especially for municipalities, smaller public authorities and NGOs, lowering barriers to participation and gradually integrating new actors into more complex forms of cooperation. At the same time, experienced beneficiaries contribute stability and

informal mentoring, reinforcing community continuity across calls and project generations. This combination of experienced and new participants helps sustain cooperation networks and institutional knowledge over time while continuously expanding the Programme community.

EQ 6.3 Are there lessons learned from projects' and Programme communication or needs for immediate improvements to address new/arising expectations from applicants and project partners? How did the projects cope with the mandatory visibility requirements? How did the support that the Programme provides to projects concerning the visibility requirements work for them?

The analysis highlights several clear lessons learned from Programme and project communication, alongside identified areas for incremental improvement rather than structural correction. A key lesson is the high effectiveness of centralised, standardised communication support. Survey results show very high satisfaction with visibility packages and hosted project pages, with over 90% of beneficiaries considering the provided tools useful or very useful. Programme-hosted project pages emerge as one of the most valued communication and visibility measures, illustrating the effectiveness of the Programme's centralised communication support. This confirms that the Programme's approach effectively supports compliance while significantly reducing the communication burden for projects. The evidence indicates that beneficiaries cope well with the mandatory visibility requirements and generally perceive the support provided by the Programme as facilitating rather than complicating compliance.

Importantly, the analysis also highlights a lesson related to social media communication and target-group segmentation. Evidence from surveys, analytics and interviews indicates that different social media platforms reach distinct audiences, with LinkedIn particularly effective for beneficiaries and decision-makers, while Facebook and X retain relevance for territorially embedded and national and regional level actors. This may imply a need for differentiated content strategies rather than relying primarily on cross posting. A more differentiated, platform-specific messaging approach would allow the Programme to better tailor content formats and narratives to the expectations of each target group. Of course, it has to be considered that this would probably require more resources.

Finally, both interviews and surveys point to rising expectations regarding storytelling and result-oriented communication. The Programme's increasing emphasis on storytelling approaches in project pages and social media reflects an appropriate response to the challenge of communicating technically complex projects to broader audiences.

EQ 6.4 Is the Programme communication effective in raising the awareness of decision-makers (national and/or EU levels) about the Programme (e.g. via project examples from the region)? For what do the decision-makers consider the Programme most useful?

Programme communication is effective in reaching decision-makers, particularly through events and targeted interactions, but less effective in ensuring sustained political visibility and systematic uptake of project results. The evidence suggests that communication is most effective when project results are presented through policy-oriented events, direct exchanges and concrete examples that can be linked to ongoing policy priorities and discussions.

Data from website analytics and surveys shows that higher level policy actors are underrepresented in general communication channels such as newsletters. In contrast, interviews and survey responses

consistently identify events – especially EUSBSR related forums, thematic workshops and policy-oriented meetings – as the most effective channels for engaging policy-makers. These formats provide direct interaction, context specific dialogue and opportunities for projects to present results in policy-relevant settings. The EUSBSR Annual Forum has become a particularly important platform in this regard, bringing together policy-makers, Programme stakeholders and project representatives around shared regional challenges and priorities.

MC members across countries note that transnational Interreg cooperation is less visible at political level than cross-border or regional/national Programmes, and that project results are not always translated into policy-relevant narratives. The challenge does not primarily relate to the quality of Programme communication tools, which are consistently described as clear, professional and comprehensive, but rather to communicating project achievements in concise, policy-relevant and decision-maker-oriented formats. Greater use of concrete project examples, storytelling and result-oriented communication could therefore help strengthen political visibility and the uptake of Programme achievements. Building more on the synergies with EUSBSR governance and networks would also contribute to higher visibility among decision-makers.

The evidence suggests that awareness of Programme achievements remains stronger among implementation-level stakeholders than among higher-level political actors. While communication successfully creates access points for decision-makers, it does not always translate into sustained political recognition of Programme achievements and results.

In this context, decision-makers primarily value the Programme for its contribution to the development of practical and transferable solutions, for supporting transnational cooperation aligned with EUSBSR priorities, and providing platforms for dialogue and exchange across governance levels. The Programme is also valued as a mechanism for knowledge exchange and policy learning, enabling decision-makers to identify, test and transfer solutions developed elsewhere in the Baltic Sea Region. Furthermore, stakeholders appreciate the Programme's contribution to the implementation of EUSBSR priorities through concrete cooperation activities, pilot actions and policy-relevant solutions.

EQ 6.5 How did PACs act as Programme multipliers, supporting the Programme and projects' communication? Which stakeholders did PAC's' activities as multipliers mainly reach out to? What were the most effective mechanisms that PACs used in communicating the Programme to its stakeholders?

PACs play a multiplier role within the Programme communication system through their contribution to the Programme communication by connecting projects with relevant stakeholders across governance levels, embedding project results into policy processes, and providing structured platforms for visibility and exchange. Most PACs use Programme communication material to inform potential project developers and Policy Area steering groups, confirming their role as trusted intermediaries rather than passive information transmitters of information.

PACs also contribute to the transfer and capitalisation of project results by using their networks and governance structures to increase the visibility, relevance and uptake of project outputs among strategic stakeholders. In performing this role, PACs primarily reach national, regional and local public authorities, sectoral agencies, thematic networks and steering groups, as well as research organisations and international actors linked to EUSBSR priorities.

The most effective communication mechanisms identified include participation in strategic events (notably EUSBSR Annual Forums), organisation of thematic workshops, direct exchanges within steering groups, and inviting projects to present results in policy fora. Interview evidence suggests that direct interaction through workshops, forums and stakeholder meetings is considered more effective for sustained policy engagement than communication channels based primarily on information dissemination.

EQ 6.6 How did national contact points contribute to the Programme communication in the countries where these existed?

NCPs and others national contact structures contribute substantially to Programme communication at national level by providing outreach, information, networking opportunities and support to applicants and beneficiaries. National-level actors play a significant role in extending the reach of Programme communication, adapting Programme messages to national and regional contexts, and supporting applicant and beneficiary engagement.

Where dedicated NCP structures exist, communication activities typically include national information events, webinars, tailored information sessions, dissemination through national networks and direct guidance to stakeholders. In these contexts, NCPs act as intermediaries between national stakeholders and the Programme, helping to increase the visibility and accessibility of Programme information. In other countries, NCP functions are less structured or embedded within existing institutional arrangements, in some cases with limited additional resources. In such cases, communication activities tend to be more ad-hoc, and MC members frequently assume NCP like roles.

Depending on the country, communication is organised centrally or involves regional actors at different territorial levels. Regional development agencies, regional councils, municipal associations and thematic networks often play an important role in disseminating information and connecting Programme opportunities with potential beneficiaries. Several countries also use national committees or sub-committees that bring together representatives from central and regional levels to discuss Programme implementation, review applications and develop common national positions. These mechanisms contribute to information exchange and help connect Programme communication with regional development priorities.

Examples illustrate how national-level communication supports the dissemination of Programme results. Latvia maintains a dedicated national Interreg portal in Latvian language that provides information on projects involving Latvian partners, project results, success stories, calls for proposals and implementation guidance. Similarly, the German BBSR maintains a dedicated Interreg B online portal and a database of transnational Interreg projects. MC members and national representatives stress that effective outreach often requires translation, contextual framing and the use of national languages. In particular, targeted communication that links Programme results to domestic policy debates and administrative realities is considered effective in engaging national authorities and decision-makers.

National-level communication can be further strengthened by Programme activities, for example, by facilitating exchange among national delegations about good practices in national-level communication.

15. General conclusions and recommendations

The Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027 remains highly relevant and well aligned with the evolving needs of the Baltic Sea Region, despite significant geopolitical changes since 2022. The Programme has successfully adjusted via its projects to strengthen resilience, energy security, crisis preparedness and regional self-reliance while maintaining its strategic objectives. Beneficiaries overwhelmingly confirm the continued relevance of their projects. The Programme demonstrates high effectiveness, strong stakeholder satisfaction and clear added value, while providing an increasingly mature model for delivering transnational cooperation.

The analysis provides strong evidence that the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme successfully delivers on its value statement. Across the portfolio, the Programme supports the transition towards greener, more resilient societies by enabling partners to develop and implement innovative, transnational solutions to shared regional challenges. The evidence also demonstrates a strong beneficiary orientation. Finally, the Programme consistently promotes knowledge transfer and capacity building by facilitating learning across borders, strengthening institutional capacities, and enabling the uptake and transfer of successful approaches across the Baltic Sea region. Together, these findings confirm that the Programme not only reflects its stated values in its design but also translates them into tangible results through its implementation.

Only minor recommendations can be made to improve the performance of the IBSR programme further:

- Small projects provide a more accessible entry point for organisations that are new to the Programme. The analysis showed that there was a strong interest from usually smaller organisations, such as NGOs and local public authorities in small projects. However, as can be seen by the high rate of failed applications, in particular smaller organisations face challenges presenting successful applications. Even if the challenges lie also within these organisations (e.g. lower technical capacity, fewer staff), providing them with even more targeted support, if the future Programme resources allow for it, might help them to strengthen the quality of their submissions and improve their chances of success.

- SCOs are well functioning, but some minor challenges merit attention. Standard hourly rates remain broadly aligned with actual costs, but inflation and changing labour costs may erode this alignment over time. Concerns also relate to travel flat rates and reporting requirements, particularly the 15% travel and accommodation flat rate, which is appreciated for its simplicity but may create inequalities when linked to staff costs. Reflection might be needed to see how these challenges can be addressed in the future. Further practical simplification could be achieved by reducing the level of detail required in timesheets and providing clearer guidance on calculating and reporting annual working hours.

- Minor potential for improvement has been detected with regard to BAMOS+. Slight improvements would further increase efficiency of processes within the MA/JS, for example by embedding the project idea form and its submissions into the BAMOS+ system, by using an automatic schedule for the consultations to reduce the time needed to plan them. From the beneficiary/applicant perspective, smaller technical improvements might further improve the

usability of the tool (e.g. the possibility of printing/exporting reports in PDF or budget overviews in MS Excel, or to improve the Report of Hours and Employment Confirmation sheets with an automatic functionality of highlighting weekend days, improving the State aid checkbox design).

- In light of recent technological advancements, the utilisation of AI tools has the potential to enhance the efficiency of administrative processes. It is suggested to explore the use of AI-based tools to automate routine screening and reporting tasks, while allowing programme staff to focus on qualitative tasks requiring expert judgement.

- Within the context of mutual benefits between IBSR and EUSBSR, a need to reflect on the general balance and depth of the IBSR support to the EUSBSR has been identified, considering the feedback of two-thirds of the MC delegations on the perceived need to shift responsibility for financing EUSBSR more firmly to Member States and mainstream programmes.

- National Contact Points (NCPs) and other national contact structures contribute substantially to programme communication at a national level. In some countries, however, the NCP's role is less embedded within existing institutional arrangements and has limited additional resources. In such cases, communication activities tend to be more ad hoc. National-level communication could be further strengthened by supportive programme activities, such as facilitating exchange of good practice among national delegations about good practices in national-level communication.