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IPA Greece – North Macedonia

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Republika e Maqedonisë së Veriut
МИНИСТЕРСТВО ЗА ЛОКАЛНА САМОУПРАВА
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**INTERREG IPA CBC PROGRAMME
"GREECE –NORTH MACEDONIA 2021-2027"**

**1st MONITORING COMMITTEE (MC) MEETING
Thessaloniki, Greece**

February 3, 2023

Brief Minutes & Decisions

The Monitoring Committee (hereinafter referred to as MC) of the Interreg IPA Cross-Border Cooperation Programme "Greece – North Macedonia 2021-2027" convened for its 1st Monitoring Committee Meeting on February 3, 2023, following an invitation by the Managing Authority INTERREG 2021-2027 (hereinafter MA).

The overall coordination of the Meeting was carried out by the Special Secretary for ERDF and CF Programmes – Hellenic Ministry of Development & Investments and Co-chair, **Mr. Georgios Zervos**. He announced that quorum is achieved, in line with the attached list of participants and informed the members to declare any conflict of interest and subsequently confidentiality and impartiality. No conflict of interest was declared. The Agenda was approved. Interpretation services in three languages were offered during the entire meeting and the proceedings were recorded.

Then, Minister of Local Self-Government, **Mr. Risto Penov**, as Co-chair, welcomed the participants and he highlighted that with this new Programme a new development possibility is opened for North Macedonia. He mentioned the slow dynamics of the financial absorption in the 2014-2020 Programme and declared that a more efficient and effective way of implementing will be targeted in the new Programme. Special reference was given to the Markova Noga crossing point which will result in tremendous development of the area. He thanked especially Mr. Zervos and the EU services for their support.

The Chair then passed the floor to Mrs. Gaby Hagmüller, representative from the European Commission, Regional and Urban Policy. The focal points of her intervention were the following:

- The European Commission is very satisfied with this new Programme. The negotiations went very well, in a good atmosphere and the result is very positive. The programme targets the right priorities for the region, such as a greener border region, a more connected border region, a more social and inclusive border region, and an improved governance of the cross-border cooperation.
- This generation of Interreg programmes aims to make real and visible changes for citizens, enterprises and stakeholders of the region.
- The European Commission puts an even bigger emphasis on partnership in the 2021-27 framework. Partnership means to involve all those who are concerned/affected by

the Programme at all stages of the programme cycle. It also means that this is needed to be reflected on the composition of this Monitoring Committee to make sure that all relevant stakeholders are on board, including representatives from economic and social partners and civil society as members in both partner countries' Delegations.

- The Programme should be accessible for citizens, and it should reach out towards citizens. It should show the merits of being in a cross-border area and of working together. This can be illustrated by projects that are easy to understand which have a concrete impact for the citizens.
- This programme includes a strategic project, the establishment of a new border cross checkpoint between Greece and North Macedonia in the Prespa area. This will be an important contribution to improve regional connectivity, facilitating the traffic of people and goods, and strengthening communication links between the two countries. It builds on preparatory work implemented under the previous Programme. The success of this strategic project will depend to a large extent on good coordination and communication between the many stakeholders and decision-makers involved. This Monitoring Committee is an important forum for this coordination and communication.
- Pre-accession programmes for cross-border cooperation like the "Greece- North Macedonia 2021-2027" continue to play an essential role as a bridge in the region, helping resolve bilateral issues and helping alleviate border obstacles. In this respect, the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region is an important forum for synergies and cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans and EU Member States.
- The Programme will have the continued support from the European Commission in its implementation.

The co-Chairperson, **Mr. Georgios Zervos** confirmed that the representation in the Greek part of the Monitoring Committee is inclusive due to wide consultation that took place during the drafting of the new Programme. Then he summarised the basic facts of the new Programmes (Priority axes, budget etc.) and informed that the goal is to activate the Programme with Calls for proposals, to avoid fragmentation of funds and and to finance projects with sufficient budget and clear results and outputs. On the contrary to the 2014-2020 period, a massive financial absorption is targeted for the first years of implementation of the new Programme.

The first presentation on MC rules of procedure, was delivered by **Mr. Nikos Chatzisavvas**, MA Programme officer. The respective document [MC rules of procedure] was approved without any objections.

Next, **Mrs. Gaby Hagmüller** intervened and repeated that the European Commission emphasizes in this programming period – more than ever- the role of the partnership and inclusion of different types of stakeholders. The DG REGIO representative suggested that the MC invites “umbrella” civil society organisations to become MC members, and that the MC rules of procedures could be adjusted accordingly.

Later, **Mrs. Aggeliki Bouziani** presented in detail the Interreg IPA CBC Programme “Greece – North Macedonia 2021 – 2027”.

Mrs. Gaby Hagmüller continued and presented the Technical Assistance (TA) novelties in the new Programme. She recommended to carefully plan and budget the TA taking into account different scenarios of spending to prepare a comprehensive work programme for TA based on a thorough assessment of existing capacities and needs. Moreover, she mentioned that TA should also be used for capacity building to the fullest extent to ensure effective administration and implementation of the Programme. She emphasised the important role of the MC to discuss, monitor and approve TA. The last part of her presentation was dedicated to the New European Bauhaus initiative and the ways that can be reflected in future Programme activities. After that, **Mr. Georgios Zervos** replied that TA funds for the new period are significantly reduced and will be primarily spent on staff costs. However, all necessary actions will be undertaken to “strengthen” some weak beneficiaries, but this will happen within the financial limits and constraints of the Programme. He added that the Bauhaus initiative is mostly taken into account in Greek sectoral Programmes.

As far as the timeline of future Calls for proposals is concerned, **Mrs. Aggeliki Bouziani** repeated that the selection criteria will be approved via an MC written procedure and the Calls will launch the soonest possible.

Then, **Mrs. Eleftheria Votsari**, JS Communication & Technical Assistance officer delivered the presentation on Programme’s publicity main issues.

Mr. Giannis Mouratoglou, MC member with voting right and representative of the Central Union of Municipalities in Greece expressed his satisfaction about the considerable step

ahead that the new Programme takes. He fully agreed with Mr. Zervos about the substantial and specific footprint that INTERREG Programmes should leave behind, irrespectively of the available budget. Additionally, he requested information on the specialization of actions to be funded. At that point, Mrs. Aggeliki Bouziani replied that the indicative actions under each Priority Axis are already written within the approved Programme document. The selection criteria will be drafted by the Managing Authority and submitted to the MC for approval. Pre-consultation with the European Commission (before approval) is also envisaged.

When all presentations ended, the representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, **Mr. Dimitar Mitrevski** congratulated all involved parties (Programming Committee, national authorities, MA/JS etc.) for the adoption of the new Programme and highlighted that the strategic project of border crossing point in Markova Noga/Laimos will be its "crown jewel", whose realisation will be of utmost importance for both countries. He stressed that in June 2023, we mark 5 years from the signing of the Prespa Agreement, which helped both countries to move forward into the common future and deepen the bilateral relationship in all areas.

He informed the MC members that a few days ago, the 1st draft of the Financing Agreement (between North Macedonia and the European Commission) for the new Programme was circulated. In that draft document, an extensive "inappropriate" usage of the adjective "North Macedonian" has been noted. Moreover, he referred to instances where a wrong country code is used (NMK instead of MK/MKD). Finally, he addressed the MC members to use the names and terminologies of Art. 1(3) of the above Agreement for all usages and all purposes erga omnes,

Mrs. Gaby Hagmüller took full ownership- on behalf the European Commission- of the 1st draft Financing Agreement circulation and apologized for any inappropriate references that are not in line with the Prespa Agreement. She committed to making sure that the final document will be fully in line with the Prespa Agreement.

Mr. Georgios Zervos, following the intervention of the EC representative, expressed his certainty that all these issues will be properly addressed and asked to focus in the challenges ahead.

In response to that, **Mr. Konstantinos Dikaros**, representative of the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, considered that onomatology and semantics should not really be an issue for discussion, since this was a draft (and not a final document) and obviously corrections will be

made. He agreed with Mr. Zervos and Mr. Mitrevski that this Programme is ultra-important for both countries.

The members of the Monitoring Committee decided unanimously to approve the:

1. Monitoring Committee Rules of Procedure
2. Occupation of the JS 2021-2027 vacancies by the existing JS staff of Balkan- Med Programme 2014-2020 (2 staff members).

Following the above, the 1st Monitoring Committee meeting was adjourned, with the Co-Chairpersons' instructions of its decisions to come into force.

This document is signed by the two co-chairpersons.

**The Co-Chairpersons
of the Monitoring Committee**

Mr. Giorgos Zervos

Mr. Risto Penov

Ministry of Development and Investments

Ministry of Local Self Government

Attachments:

1. Agenda of the 1st Monitoring Committee meeting
2. Participants' list of the 1st Monitoring Committee meeting
3. Presentations delivered at the 1st Monitoring Committee meeting
4. Monitoring Committee Rules of Procedure