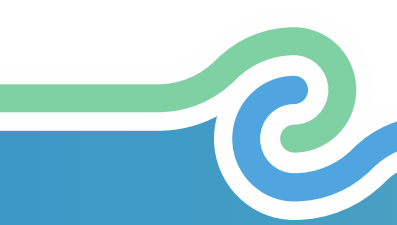


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REPORT FROM THE 2ND OPERATIONAL EVALUATION 2025

Italy – Croatia

Introduction	3
Proposal of Evaluation and methodology	3
Context	4
Chapter 1 Quantitative analysis	6
1.1 Programme Overview	6
1.1.1 Financial overview	6
1.1.2 Financial appropriation and financial allocation per Specific Objective	7
1.1.3 Physical Monitoring	8
1.1.4 Area-based Monitoring	9
1.1.5 Supply and demand	10
1.1.6 Target N+3	11
1.2 Calls of Proposals overview	12
1.2.1 First Call of Proposals - Small-scale projects	13
1.2.2 First Call of Proposals - Standard projects	16
1.2.3 Second Call of Proposals - Operation of Strategic Importance	21
1.2.4 Third Call of Proposals - Small-scale projects	23
1.2.5 Third Call of Proposals - Standard projects	25
1.3 Focus on legal status and types of beneficiary	27
1.4 Focus on Newcomers	30
Chapter 2 Effectiveness and Efficiency	34
2.1 introduction	34
2.2 Gap analysis	34
2.3 Lessons Learnt from the first Operational Evaluation	36
2.4 Results from the online surveys on first and 3rd Calls for Proposals	41
2.4.1 Analysis of the results of the Survey on the Small-Scale call	42
2.4.2 Analysis of the results of the Survey on the Standard Call	45
2.4.3 Conclusions	48
Chapter 3 Communication	50
3.1 Introduction	50
3.2 Analysis of Communication Objectives	51
3.4 Conclusions	57
3.5 Communication, Information and Visibility Initiatives	59
3.6 Performance analysis	64
3.7 Efficiency Analysis	67



Introduction

Proposal of Evaluation and methodology

This document presents the Second Operational Evaluation of the Interreg Italy–Croatia Programme 2021–2027, covering the period from January 2024 to September 2025. As defined in the Interreg Italy–Croatia Evaluation Plan 2021–2027 (version 2.0), the evaluation was carried out by the Evaluation unit of the Managing Authority (MA) in close collaboration with the offices of the MA and the Joint Secretariat (JS).

The main objective of this evaluation is to assess the efficiency, effectiveness and communication activities of the Programme. The management and implementation systems, with particular attention to the application process, including procedures, tools, timelines, are also included in this evaluation.

Building upon the findings of the First Operational Evaluation, this second assessment seeks to determine whether the corrective measures introduced after the first review have effectively addressed the previously identified gaps and contributed to improving:

- The overall quality of Programme execution;
- The performance and management efficiency of Programme operations;
- The effectiveness of communication activities;

The report is structured into three main sections:

- A quantitative analysis of the Programme's financial and physical performance;
- An assessment of the Programme's performance in the Call for Proposals procedures;
- An evaluation of the communication activities.

The analysis combines quantitative and qualitative research methods, consistent with the methodology outlined in the Programme Evaluation Plan.

Quantitative analysis focused on measurable figures such as participation levels, project completion rates, and communication reach. The JEMS monitoring system served as the primary data source, providing detailed information on the programme financial performance, project partnerships, beneficiary organisation types, legal status, geographical distribution.

Qualitative tools were employed to complement and contextualise numerical findings, offering deeper insights into participant experiences and the operational environment. These included:

- Semi-structured interviews with Programme and project stakeholders;



Italy – Croatia

- Open-ended survey questions for project beneficiaries and applicants to capture perceptions, satisfaction levels, and suggestions for improvement;
- Focus group discussions with communication officers and managing bodies to validate findings and refine recommendations.

Two dedicated surveys were conducted to evaluate the performance of the Third Call process for both Standard and Small-Scale projects:

- Survey on Standard Project Calls: Published in July 2025 on the European Commission's EUSurvey platform and distributed to 500 recipients;
- Survey on Small-Scale Project Calls: Published in July 2025 on EUSurvey and sent to 146 recipients.

The surveys examined the clarity of procedures, accessibility of application tools, user experience with JEMS, effectiveness of provided guidance, and the adequacy of support from Programme authorities.

To evaluate the effectiveness of communication activities, both quantitative data and qualitative feedback were analysed:

- Quantitative data sources: project websites and analytics reports, social media engagement data (Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube);
- Qualitative instruments: satisfaction questionnaires completed by participants of the Info Days promoting the Third Call, and individual interviews and a focus group with members of the MA and JS communication teams.

Together, these tools provided a comprehensive overview of how communication activities contributed to raising awareness, facilitating participation, and enhancing the visibility of funded projects across both participating countries.

Context

The Programme Interreg Italy-Croatia 2021-2027 finances cross-border cooperation projects focusing on innovation in the blue economy, capitalises previous cooperation experiences, and creates stronger synergies with EUSAIR. The Programme funds three types of projects: Small-scale, Standard, and Operations of Strategic Importance (OSI), within five Priorities and seven Specific Objectives. So far three calls for proposals were launched, leading to the implementation of 82 cross-border projects in Italy and Croatia.

The Programme's Area encompasses the Adriatic Sea, a shared economic and environmental resource that promotes cooperation. The Adriatic Sea, with its vast area of 138,595 km² and an average width of 170 km, is abundant in flora and fauna, offering significant potential for the development of the Blue economy. The region spans over 85,562 km² and has a population exceeding 12,292,116 inhabitants,



Italy – Croatia

resulting in an average population density of 143.66 inhabitants per km². A substantial majority, approximately 88%, of the population resides in the Italian regions. The Italy-Croatia Programme includes 33 statistical NUTS III territories, comprising 25 provinces in Italy and 8 counties in Croatia. The Programme vision of ***“Focusing on innovation and sustainability in the blue economy, capitalizing previous cooperation experiences, creating synergies with EUSAIR”*** shall be attained through the Programme five Priorities and seven Specific Objectives.

PROGRAMME PRIORITIES AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES		
	PRIORITY 1 Sustainable growth in the blue economy	1.1 Developing and enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies 1.2 Developing skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship
	PRIORITY 2 Green and resilient shared environment	2.1 Promoting climate change adaptation and disaster risk prevention, resilience taking into account eco-system based approaches 2.2 Enhancing protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity and green infrastructure, including in urban areas, and reducing all forms of pollution
	PRIORITY 3 Sustainable maritime and multimodal transport	3.1 Developing and enhancing sustainable, climate resilient, intelligent and intermodal national, regional and local mobility, including improved access to TEN-T and cross-border mobility
	PRIORITY 4 Culture and tourism for sustainable development	4.1 Enhancing the role of culture and sustainable tourism in economic development, social inclusion and social innovation
	PRIORITY 5 Integrated governance for stronger cooperation	5.1 Other actions to support better cooperation governance

Figure 1: Programme Priorities and Specific Objectives



Chapter 1 Quantitative analysis

1.1 Programme Overview

1.1.1 Financial overview

The Interreg Programme Italy-Croatia (IP) has a total financial appropriation of €222,724,299.00, including Technical Assistance. As of July 1, 2025, the IP submitted its first payment application to the European Commission for €23,067,539.32.

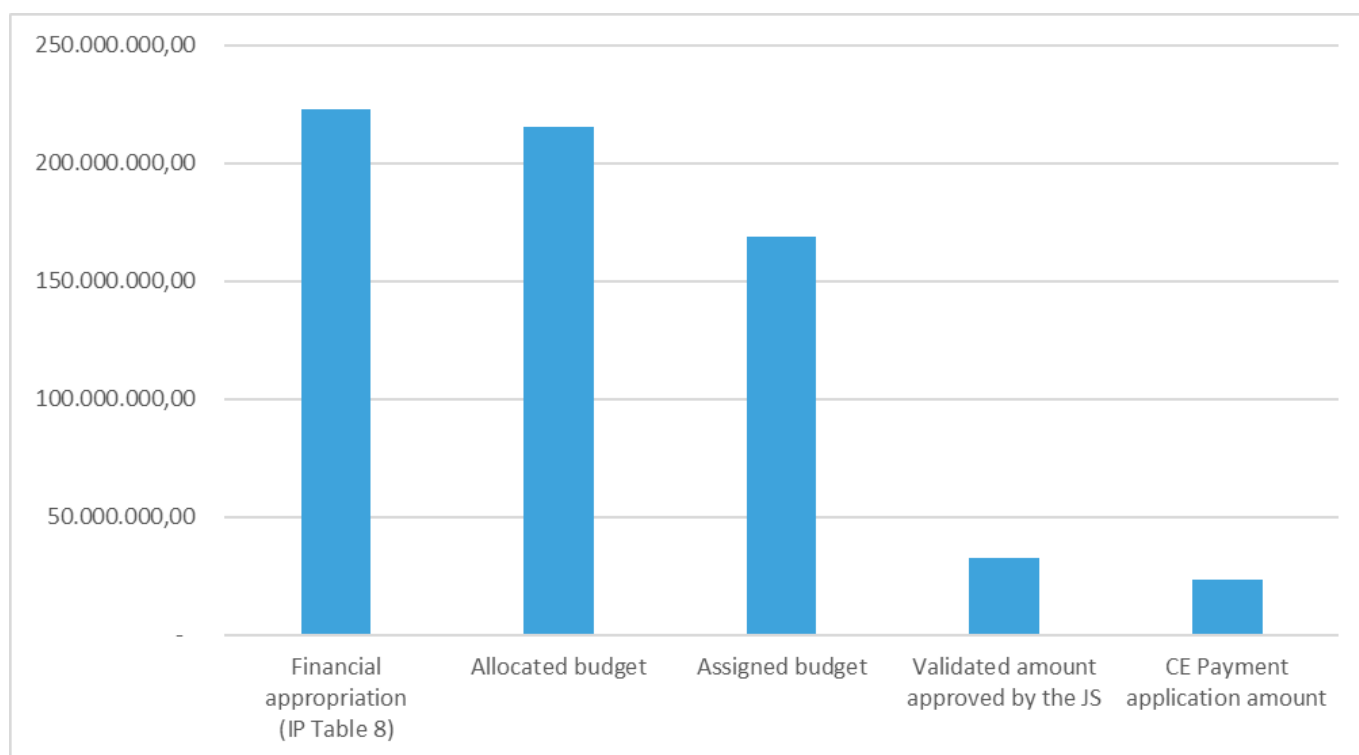


Figure 2: Programme's financial overview, in Millions of Euros

The **"Financial Plan"** shows the financial appropriation detailed in Table 8 of the Implementation Programme (IP). This represents the European Union's commitment to cross-border cooperation between Italy and Croatia, specifying the maximum available resources (€222,724,299.00).

Subsequently, the **"Allocated Budget"** quantifies the total financial allocation made by the Programme across the three calls for proposals published to date. This relevant figure demonstrates the Programme's proactive engagement in funding various initiatives by formally allocating specific



Italy – Croatia

portions of the overall financial plan (215.180.149,88).

The **"Assigned Budget"** signifies the financial allocations for contracted projects, representing the total cost of activities deemed eligible for Programme funding as detailed in subsidy contracts. This reflects tangible commitments and authorized project expenditures. For closed projects, the final validated amount after the verifications conducted by the JS, is included for an updated overview of the eligible budget (€168,689,987.38).

Moving forward, the **"Validated Amount"** represents the sum reported by the beneficiaries, subsequently validated by the controller, and ultimately approved by the JS (€32,651,121.35).

Ultimately, the **"CE Payment application amount"** denotes the funds officially remitted to the European Commission as payment applications, representing the conclusive phase of financial advancement and accountability within the Programme's framework (€23,067,539.32).

1.1.2 Financial appropriation and financial allocation per Specific Objective

The graph shows the Programme's total financial appropriation versus the budget allocated to date for each Specific Objective (SO), with "Allocated Budget" representing funds formally committed via Calls for Proposals.

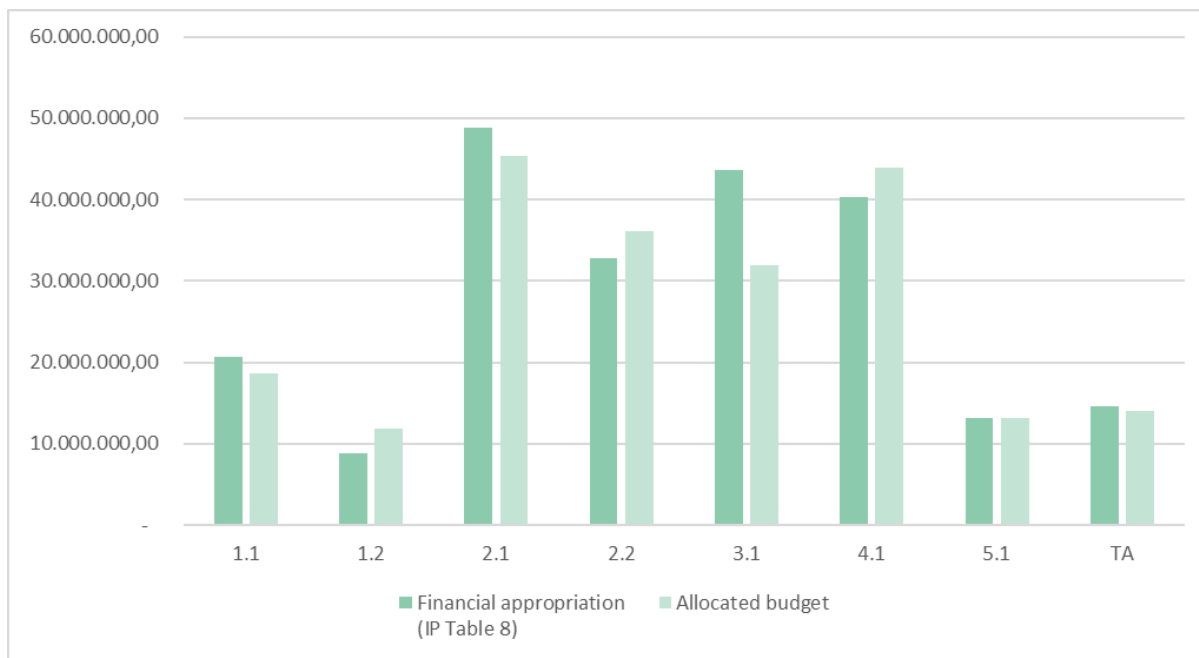


Figure 3: Financial appropriation and allocated budget, in Millions of Euros



Italy – Croatia

This figure is crucial, illustrating the Programme's effectiveness in transforming strategic objectives into concrete actions and allocating funds for specific projects. The discrepancy between the total appropriation and the allocated budget indicates the resources to be made available through new Calls for Proposals according to the approved [Plan of the Calls for Proposal](#), thereby providing an accurate assessment of the Programme's current implementation stage and its capacity for financial absorption over time.

It is also fundamental to underline that, with reference to specific objectives 1.2 and 2.2, the current allocation exceeds the amount established in the overall financial plan. However, it is important to note that this exceeding amount falls fully within the 15% flexibility threshold granted at priority level by the regulation.

1.1.3 Physical Monitoring

Moving from financial to physical data, the following table presents a comprehensive overview of the number of funded projects, participations, and distinct beneficiaries for each SO and for the Programme overall.

SO	Nr. of projects	Nr. of unique beneficiaries	Nr. of participations
1.1	8	45	53
1.2	5	28	33
2.1	15	83	113
2.2	15	76	97
3.1	10	55	85
4.1	16	103	115
5.1	13	35	38
Total	82	425	534
Total nr. of unique beneficiaries on overall Programme		315	

Figure 4: Number of projects, unique beneficiaries and participations by SO



Italy – Croatia

Out of 315 unique beneficiaries, 534 instances of participation indicate that many organisations or individuals have engaged in multiple projects or objectives.

It is important to note, however, that certain medium and large beneficiaries, such as agencies and regions, are eligible to participate at the departmental level. This analysis, however, focuses on the legal entity. Despite this, and while the incidence of multiple participations by the same entities remains high, a distinct improvement is observed compared to the preceding programming period. This is evidenced by the increasing participation of newcomers, as further detailed in paragraph 1.4 'Focus on Newcomers'.

1.1.4 Area-based Monitoring

The accompanying maps illustrate the financial allocation and balanced distribution of budgetary resources across the territories involved in the Programme. A more pronounced absorption of these resources is evident in certain geographical zones, specifically in Croatia's Istarska and Primorsko-goranska counties, as well as in the southern reaches of the country. In Italy, the North-Eastern provinces and some areas in the Puglia Region also demonstrate an elevated rate of resource utilization. This detailed financial mapping provides valuable insights into the areas where the Programme's funding is deployed most effectively and efficiently, highlighting successful implementation regions and identifying potential areas for further strategic investment.



Figure 5: Allocated budget per Croatian County, in Millions of Euros



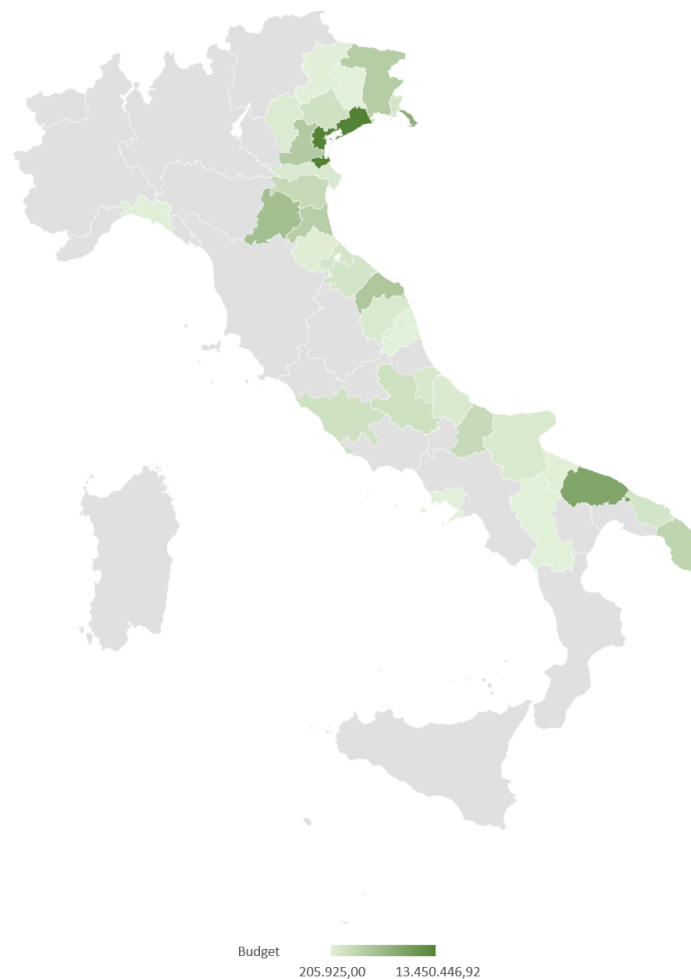


Figure 6: Allocated budget per Italian Province, in Millions of Euros

1.1.5 Supply and demand

Financial analysis of the Programme reveals a significant gap between the budget allocated for three calls and the amount requested by applicants, indicating a substantial imbalance in resource allocation and demand.

A significant budget disparity exists for specific objective 4.1 and the two objectives under priority 2. This initial financial overview is incomplete, as it lacks critical factors like project eligibility, admissibility, and quality, detailed in project-specific Calls. Integrating these criteria is crucial for a more accurate understanding of financial needs and effective budget allocation, informing future strategic planning.

Italy – Croatia

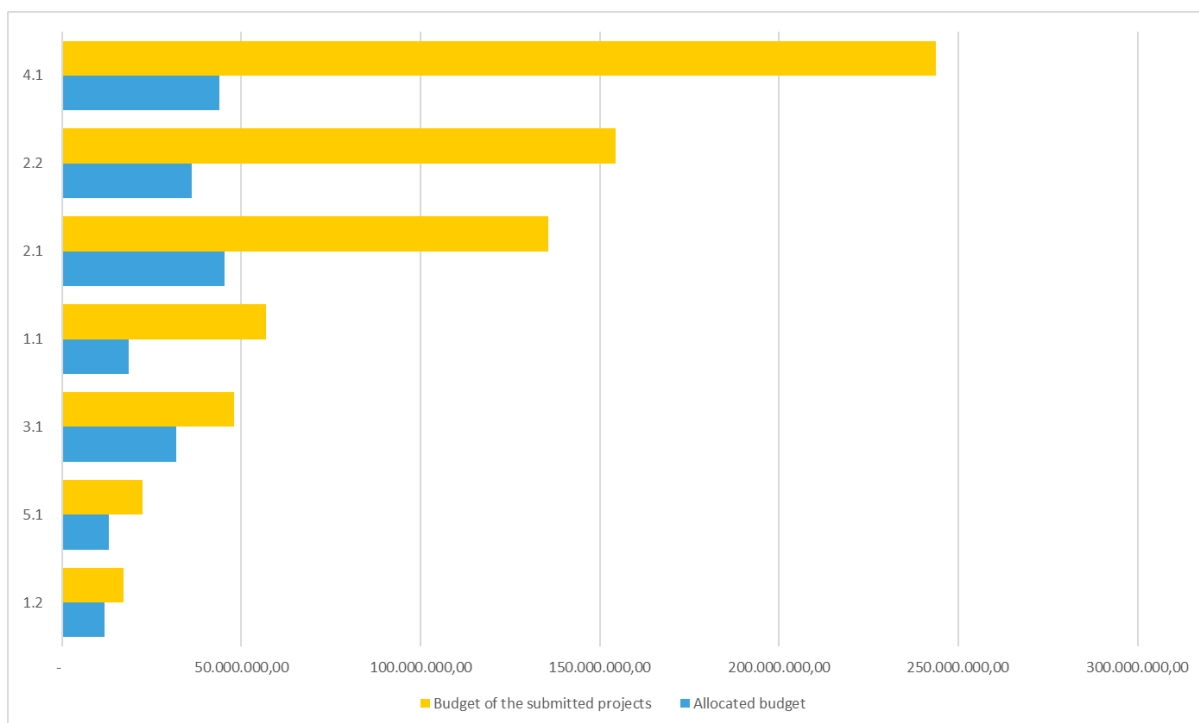


Figure 7: Allocated budget and budget of submitted projects by SO, in Millions of Euros

1.1.6 Target N+3

This section analyses the alignment of annual ERDF N+3 expenditure targets with current and projected financial payment applications from 2025-2030, ensuring financial stability and compliance with European Commission regulations.

The Programme achieved its N+3 target by the end of 2025 ahead of schedule, thanks to the successful payment application submitted to the European Commission on July 1, 2025. This early success provides significant financial stability and strategic flexibility.

Having met the 2025 target, Programme Authorities can now focus on qualitative project implementation and long-term strategic development without immediate financial pressure.

Positive momentum in planning suggests that even with conservative projections, aggregated beneficiary amounts, validated by controllers and approved by the JS, are expected to exceed the European Commission's N+3 ERDF targets.



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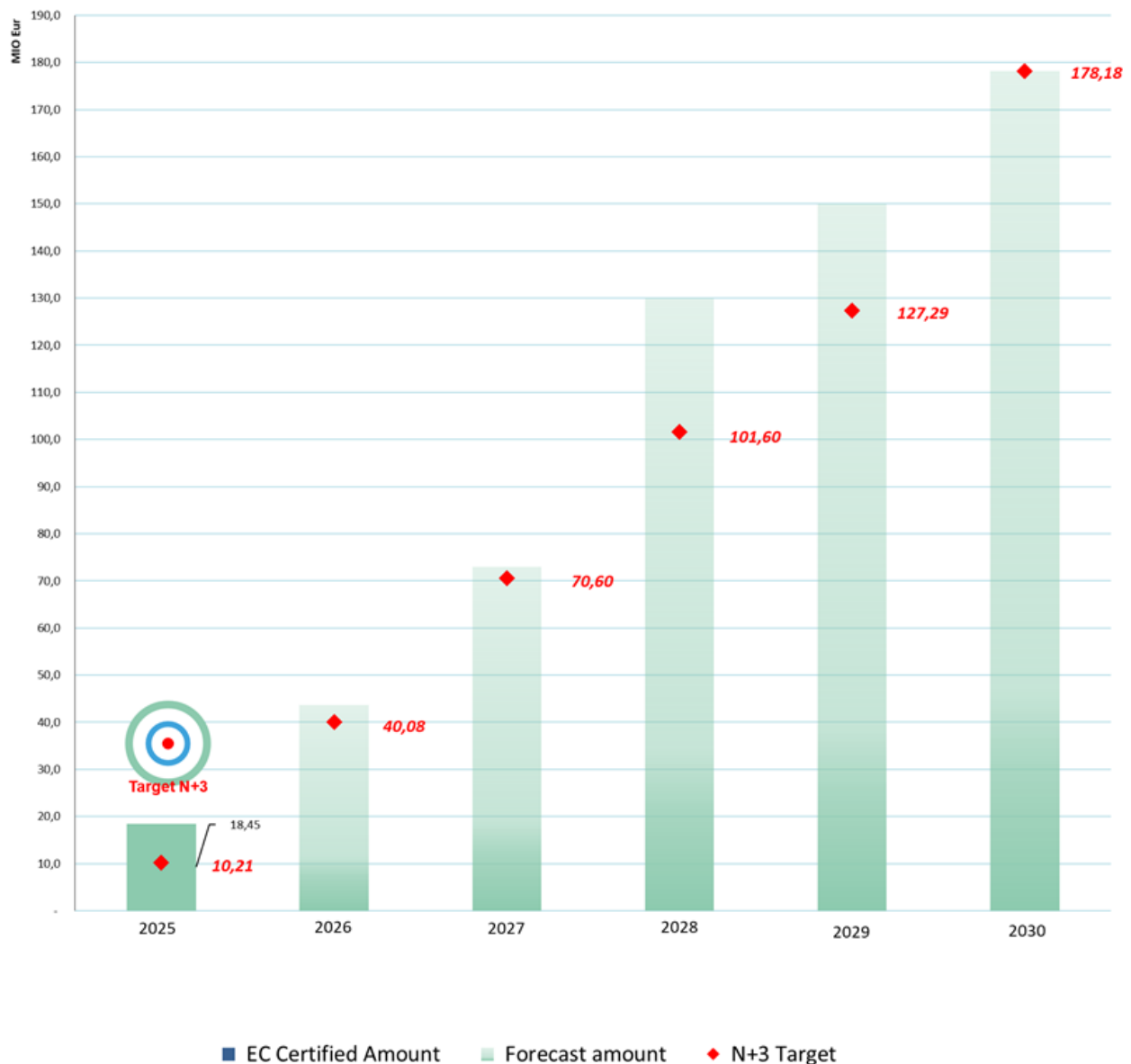


Figure 8: ERDF N+3 expenditure targets and 2025-2030 financial payment forecast, in Millions of Euros

1.2 Calls of Proposals overview

The Programme has published three distinct Calls for Proposals, each addressing specific objectives and defined timelines, thereby contributing uniquely to the overall advancement and the mobilization of resources and expertise within the Programme Area.

The first Call, for Small-scale Projects (SSPs) and Standard Projects, opened on November 28, 2022. SSPs, closed February 28, 2023, promoted local collaboration and pilot testing of innovative solutions.



Italy – Croatia

Standard Projects, closed March 22, 2025, are the Programme's core, focusing on structured interventions for long-term benefits in priority sectors.

The second Call, launched on September 17, 2024, and closed on November 19, 2024, specifically targeted Operations of Strategic Importance (OSI). These projects were conceived to tackle crucial territorial challenges through an integrated and ambitious approach. This required substantial coordination and a strategic outlook to maximize the impact of investments and their contribution to the Programme's overall goals.

Each subparagraph details project selection mechanisms by call and project type, offering:

1. **Financial Table:** Allocations, contracted project budgets, and validated/approved amounts with progress percentages.
2. **Histogram Chart:** Number of submitted, eligible, "quality"-approved, and contracted proposals.
3. **Requested Budget and Content:** Budgets requested by Lead Applicants, eligible projects, "quality"-approved projects, and contracted projects.

These representations provide a clear, complete overview of the project selection process.

1.2.1 First Call of Proposals - Small-scale projects

The first Small-scale projects Call (SSP) invested 5 million Euros in cross-border cooperation. Funding was distributed across specific objectives 2.2, 4.1, and 5.1, with initial allocations for 2.2 and 4.1 adjusted due to low demand. All 21 contracted SSP projects were successfully completed, achieving an exceptional 97.8% absorption rate of assigned resources, indicating efficient fund utilization and strong project management. Minor variations across objectives were negligible, highlighting consistent financial performance.

SO	Original Call allocated budget	Original Budget	Validated amount approved by the JS	Validated amount approved by JS on original budget %
2.2	1.250.000,00	907.082,90	900.298,32	99,3%
4.1	1.250.000,00	998.782,00	954.823,92	95,6%
5.1	2.500.000,00	3.066.978,60	3.008.589,98	98,1%



Italy – Croatia

Total	5.000.000,00	4.972.843,50	4.863.712,22	97,8%
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Figure 9: SSP Allocated budget and validated amount for the First Call of Proposals, in Millions of Euros

The first SSP call received 32 submissions, totaling €7,289,595.44. All approved projects were fully financed due to strategic fund reallocation.

A rigorous selection process, particularly the initial eligibility assessment, resulted in a high ineligibility rate for projects. Out of 32 submissions, 9 were deemed ineligible due to administrative issues, unmet criteria, or incomplete documentation. This highlights the need for meticulous preparation and strict compliance.

While few projects were rejected for quality (only two in Specific Objective 2.1), this first call highlights the need for strong initial screening and thorough quality evaluations. It shows that even formally compliant projects might lack the necessary substance for funding, offering valuable insights for future applicants and administrators.



Figure 10: SSP Number of submitted, eligible, quality passed and contracted by SO, in Millions of Euros



Italy – Croatia

SO	Budget of the submitted projects	Budget of the eligible project:	Budget of the quality passed projects	Budget of the contracted projects	Final budget for the closed projects
2.2	1.537.325,44	1.351.003	907.082,90	907.082,90	900.298,32
4.1	2.275.779,00	998.782	998.782,00	998.782,00	954.823,92
5.1	3.476.491,00	3.066.979	3.066.978,60	3.066.978,60	3.008.589,98
Total	7.289.595,44	5.416.763,54	4.972.843,50	4.972.843,50	4.863.712,22

Figure 11: SSP Budget distribution by category and SO, in Millions of Euros

Analysis of SSP quality across Specific Objectives

Boxplots illustrate project quality variations among funded proposals across different SOs, highlighting each SO's strengths and weaknesses.

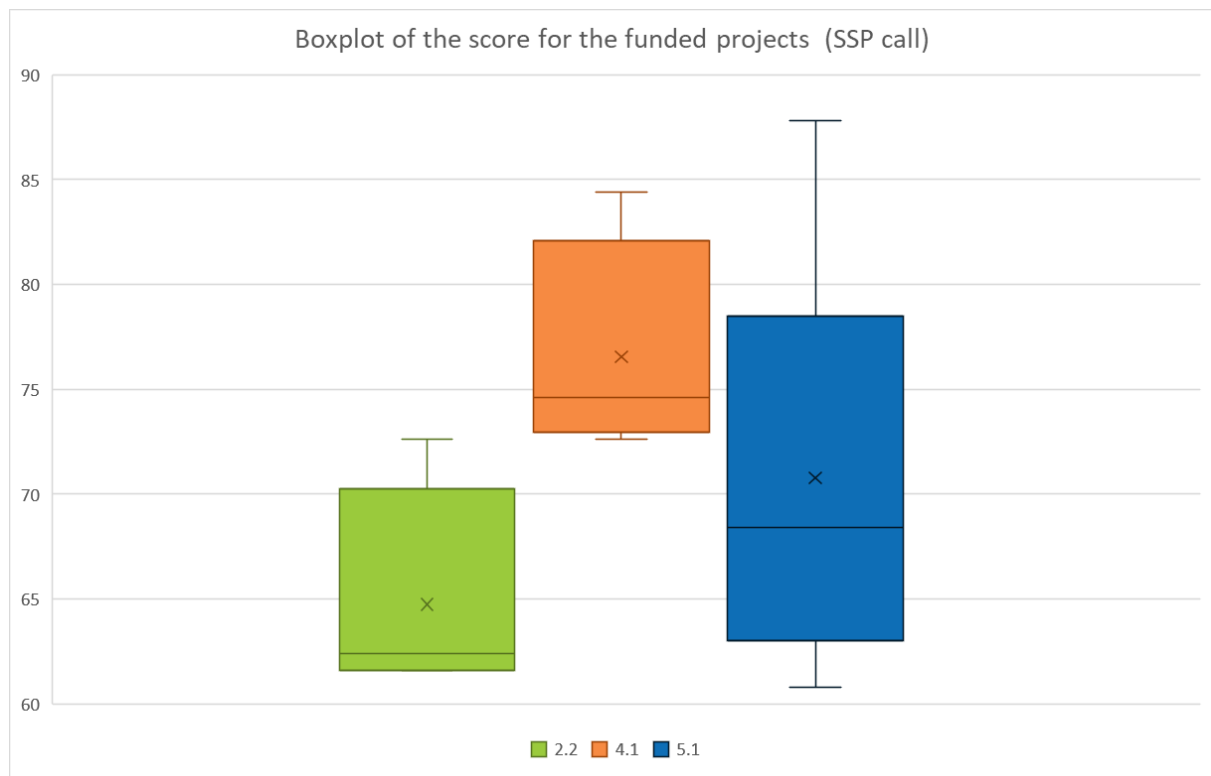


Figure 12: SSP Boxplot of the score for funded project by SO



Italy – Croatia

SO 4.1: Exemplary and Homogeneous Project Quality

Projects under SO 4.1 show exceptionally high and consistent quality. The compressed boxplot indicates a narrow score range, suggesting robust proposals that consistently met evaluation criteria. This homogeneity implies clear understanding of objectives, strong development, and effective implementation, pointing to an effective selection and framework.

SO 5.1: Decent Quality with High Score Variability

SO 5.1 shows decent overall project quality but with significant variability, scoring between 61 and 87 out of 100. This wide range, despite an acceptable average, suggests inconsistent quality, possibly due to differing interpretations, team experience, or adherence to standards. Further investigation into high and low-scoring projects is needed to understand these discrepancies.

SO 2.2: Concentrated in the Lower Range, Above Threshold

Evaluations for SO 2.2 consistently exceeded the 60-point funding threshold but clustered at the lower end of acceptable scores. This suggests that while all funded projects met basic quality, few were exceptional. This concentration may indicate a competitive environment, the objective's nature, or a need for better applicant guidance.

1.2.2 First Call of Proposals - Standard projects

The first call for standard projects saw a substantial increase in funding, from an initial 95 Million Euros to almost 115 MEur for 55 projects. This 20 MEur increase was approved due to high demand, with 98 of 161 proposals passing the quality threshold. While this supported more high-quality projects, it reduced resources for future calls.

As of mid-2025, financial expenditure on standard projects from the first call is slow, despite being in their third reporting period. This overall slow financial absorption is concerning, though Priority 1 objectives show better progress. Delays stem from two main areas.

Delays in Priority 3.1 are expected, a known historical trend from the 2014-2020 period, likely due to the inherent complexities of these projects.

Projects under Specific Objective (SO) 4.1 are experiencing significant and unexplained delays, unlike those in Priority 3.1. These delays are not due to historical trends, suggesting new issues. Further investigation is needed to identify and address the specific barriers.



Italy – Croatia

SO	Original Call allocated budget	Original Budget	Validated amount approved by JS	Validated amount approved by JS on original budget %
1.1	8.750.000,00	12.347.795,74	3.665.308,38	29,7%
1.2	3.500.000,00	5.735.912,48	1.797.676,06	31,3%
2.1	25.625.000,00	30.140.635,45	6.452.468,82	21,4%
2.2	15.250.000,00	20.409.150,60	4.628.991,56	22,7%
3.1	22.500.000,00	21.701.572,31	4.039.559,31	18,6%
4.1	19.375.000,00	24.643.630,06	5.067.350,33	20,6%
Total	95.000.000,00	114.978.696,64	25.651.354,46	22,3%

Figure 13: Standard Projects Allocated budget and validated amount for the First Call of Proposals, in Millions of Euros

A significant challenge in project proposal evaluation is the high failure rate in initial eligibility and quality assessments, indicating issues with guidelines, applicant support, or evaluation criteria. Out of 161 proposals, 17 (over 10%) were immediately ineligible due to administrative oversights or mismatches with the Programme's scope. After eligibility, 144 proposals underwent quality assessment. 46 (32%) failed to meet the minimum quality threshold, highlighting concerns about their substantive content, methodology, expected impact, or feasibility despite being procedurally sound.

A deep dive into the data reveals that SO 4.1 had the highest application "mortality" rate due to numerous rejections based on initial ineligibility and poor quality, indicating a gap between expectations and applicant capacity. SO 2.2 projects also declined significantly due to quality issues, with JS evaluators consistently deeming many proposals as insufficient. This trend, while not as pronounced as SO 4.1, indicates applicants struggle to submit high-quality proposals that meet evaluator expectations.



Italy – Croatia

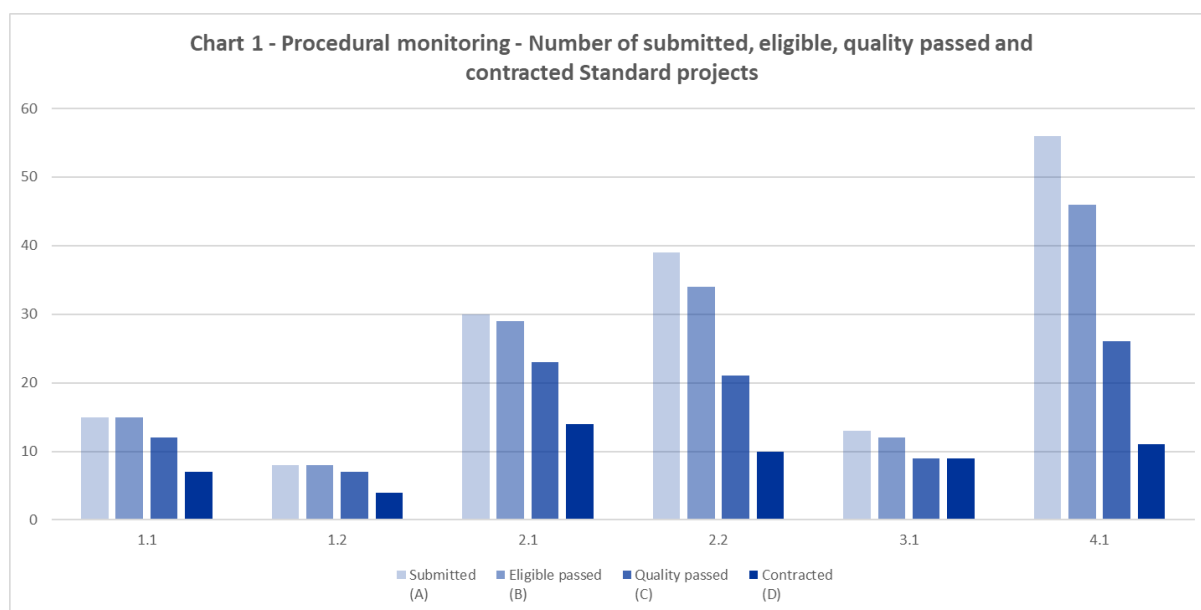


Figure 14: Standard Projects Number of submitted, eligible, quality passed and contracted by SO

SO	Budget of the submitted projects	Budget of the eligible projects	Budget of the quality passed projects	Budget of the contracted projects	Final budget for the closed projects
1.1	24.888.401,01	24.888.401	20.738.137	12.347.795,74	
1.2	10.941.042,07	10.941.042	9.676.067	5.735.912,48	
2.1	59.500.563,94	58.718.771	47.266.094	30.140.635,45	
2.2	79.542.659,49	70.576.758	45.352.193	20.409.150,60	
3.1	28.846.719,82	27.420.620	21.701.572	21.701.572,31	
4.1	105.731.080,63	90.811.468	53.654.326	24.643.630,06	
Total	309.450.466,96	283.357.059,66	198.388.389,26	114.978.696,64	-

Figure 15: Standard Projects Budget distribution by category and SO, in Millions of Euros

Analysis of Standard project quality across Specific Objectives

The graph illustrates the Programme's unmet demand, showing high-quality projects that passed assessment but remained unfunded due to their ranking. Blue histograms show the percentage of



Italy – Croatia

these projects, quantifying unrealized potential. Light blue diamonds mark the minimum funding score for approved projects, while a yellow diamond represents the average score of approved but unfunded projects.

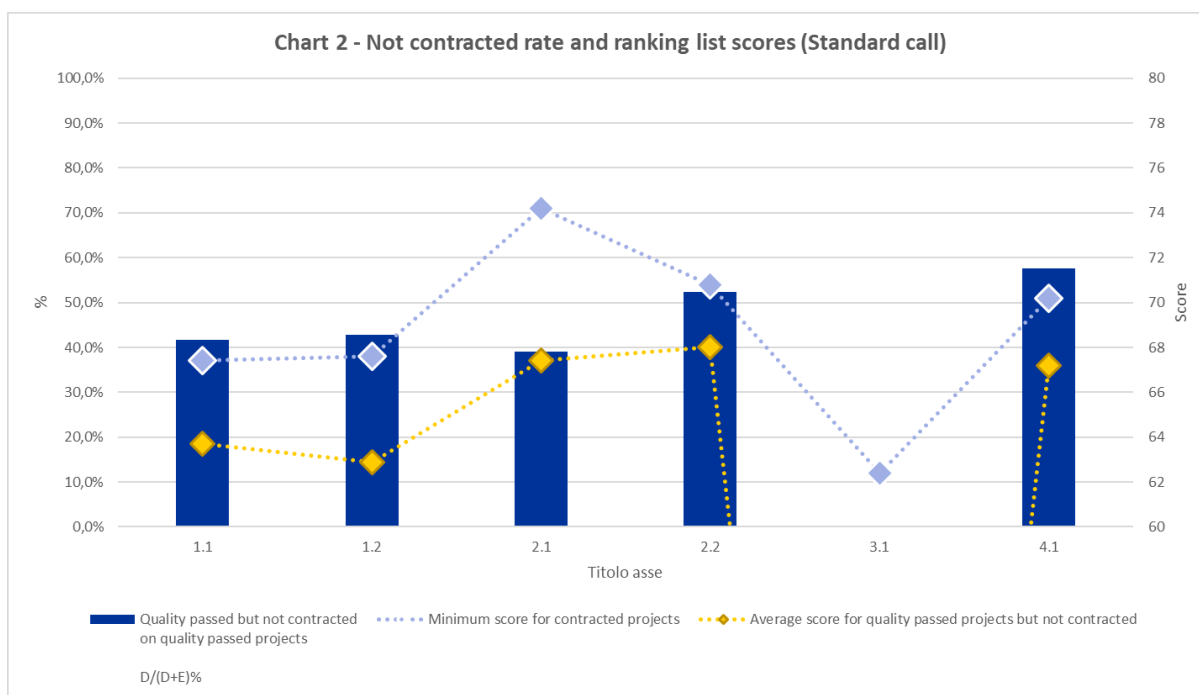


Figure 16: Standard Projects Not contracted rate and ranking list scores by SO

A deeper dive into the data reveals distinct patterns and challenges across different specific objectives:

SO 4.1 and SO 2.1: Significant Unfunded Potential Despite High Quality

Both SO 4.1 and 2.1 had a high incidence of unfunded potential. The minimum funding score was consistently around 70 points, while the average score of excluded but quality projects was approximately 68 points. This narrow two-point difference indicates numerous strong proposals just missed funding, highlighting the high-quality standard and the Programme's limited capacity for the volume of valid proposals.

SO 2.1: Exceptionally High Quality, Persistent Funding Gap

Specific Objective 2.1 had fewer unfunded projects but a very high quality bar, with a minimum funding threshold of 74 points. This indicates exceptional project quality and intense competition. Excluded projects under SO 2.1 still averaged 68 points, showing that even strong proposals were not



Italy – Croatia

funded.

Priority 1 Objectives (SO 1.1 and SO 1.2): High Demand, Slightly Lower Average Quality of Unfunded Projects
Priority 1 Objectives (SO 1.1 and 1.2) account for 40% of unfunded proposals, indicating high demand. Despite a slightly lower minimum funding score (68 points) and average excluded project score (63-64 points) compared to SO 4.1 and SO 2.1, the large volume of unfunded projects still represents a significant missed opportunity for Programme goals.

Specific Objective (SO) 3.1 - No more projects fundable

For SO 3.1, all project proposals exceeding the quality threshold received funding, eliminating the need for resource-based selection. This commitment to excellence ensures no high-quality initiative was overlooked due to budget limitations.

The graphs use boxplots to show how funding and MC decisions affect project selection for specific objectives. Boxplots display proposal quality distribution, with whiskers showing the lowest and highest 25%, and the central box representing the middle 50%.

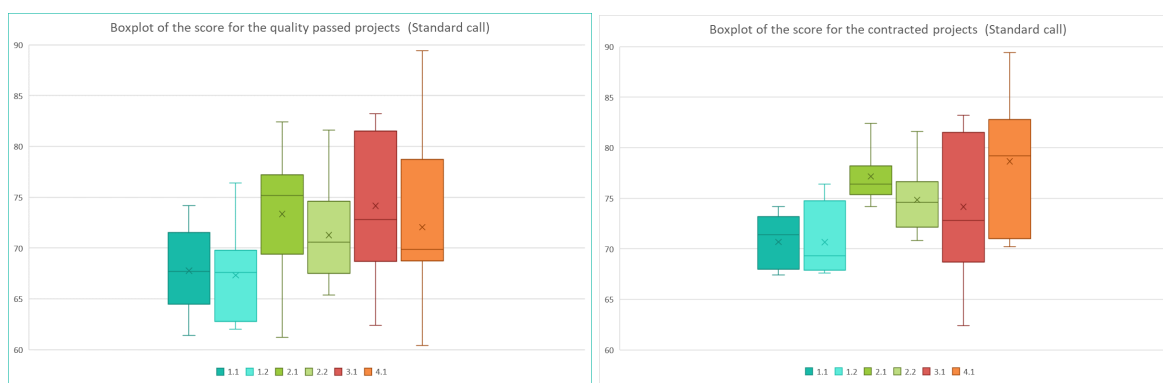


Figure 17 and 18: Boxplots of the score for quality passed and contracted projects by SO

Comparing the left graph, showing all project proposals above 60 points, with the right graph, illustrating funded proposals, is essential to understand the financial selection process's impact.

Upon closer examination of the data, several key observations emerge:

Specific Objective (SO) 3.1

It is evident that for SO 3.1, no financial selection was implemented. This indicates a scenario where all proposals that met the established quality threshold were subsequently funded.

Specific Objective (SO) 4.1



Italy – Croatia

In the case of SO 4.1, the financial selection process played a more active role. Here, the selection effectively eliminated the 25% of proposals that exhibited the lowest quality among those initially eligible. This suggests a more competitive environment or a tighter budget, necessitating the exclusion of lower-performing but still technically eligible proposals.

Other Objectives and Priority 2

For the remaining objectives, the financial selection process demonstrated a significant positive impact on the average quality of the funded proposals. This phenomenon is characterized as a "leap upward," signifying a substantial improvement in the overall quality of projects that ultimately received funding compared to the broader pool of initially eligible proposals. This mechanism is particularly pronounced for objectives under Priority 2, specifically SO 2.1 and SO 2.2. In these areas, a remarkable enhancement in the average quality of funded proposals was observed, underscoring the effectiveness of the selection process in elevating the standard of supported projects. This could imply a strong emphasis on quality within Priority 2 or a more rigorous evaluation process for these specific objectives.

1.2.3 Second Call of Proposals - Operation of Strategic Importance

The second call for proposals under the Italy-Croatia 21-27 Programme is exclusively dedicated to Operations of Strategic Importance (OSI). This particular call has successfully funded a total of six operations, with each operation specifically addressing one of the Programme's distinct SO. The cumulative budgets for these six operations amounts to an impressive €37,696,055.85.

Significant progress has been made in the implementation process, as the crucial condition clearing phase has now been successfully concluded for all funded with conditions projects. This milestone ensures that all necessary prerequisites and administrative conditions have been met.

Subsequent to the successful conclusion of the condition clearing phase, three of the six projects have progressed to the contracting stage, thereby formalizing the execution of a subsidy contract. The remaining projects are anticipated to advance similarly in due course. Project activities for all funded operations are officially slated to commence on January 1, 2026.



Italy – Croatia

SO	Original Call allocated budget	Original Budget	Validated amount approved by JS	Validated amount approved by JS on original budget %
1.1	3.125.000,00	3.125.000,00		0,0%
1.2	6.250.000,00	6.107.240,00		0,0%
2.1	7.500.000,00	7.259.617,64		0,0%
2.2	6.875.000,00	6.869.437,00		0,0%
3.1	7.500.000,00	7.498.925,30		0,0%
4.1	6.875.000,00	6.835.835,91		0,0%
Total	38.125.000,00	37.696.055,85	-	0,0%

Figure 19: OSI Allocated budget and validated amount for the Second Call of Proposals, in Millions of Euros

SO	Number of projects	Number of project partners
1.1	1	2
1.2	1	6
2.1	1	14
2.2	1	13
3.1	1	15
4.1	1	13
Total	6	63

Figure 20: Number of projects and project partners by SO



Italy – Croatia

1.2.4 Third Call of Proposals - Small-scale projects

The third call has officially commenced, marking the launch of the second procedure specifically designed for Small-scale projects. This call allocated a total budget of 5 million euros, a figure consistently maintained since the inception of the programming period. However, the MA and the JS are preparing to present a proposal to the esteemed Monitoring Committee. This meeting is scheduled to take place on October 21 and 22 in the scenic city of Rovinj.

This proposal suggests a minor budget adjustment to optimize fund distribution across specific objectives, rather than simply following the initial allocation. The goal of this recalibration is to improve project effectiveness. Subject to Monitoring Committee approval, the revised budget will be €5,122,971.06, reflecting a deliberate increase to maximize the potential of Small-scale projects. This proposed adjustment highlights a proactive approach to resource management, ensuring a flexible financial framework that can respond to the Programme's evolving needs and priorities.

SO	Original Call allocated budget	PROPOSAL Original Budget*	Validated amount approved by the JS	Validated amount approved by JS on original budget %
2.2	1.250.000,00	267.432,00		
4.1	1.250.000,00	2.055.210,40		
5.1	2.500.000,00	2.800.328,66		
Total	5.000.000,00	5.122.971,06	-	0,0%

Figure 21: SSP Allocated budget and validated amount for the Third Call of Proposals, in Millions of Euros

This report details the outcomes of the latest funding round for Specific Objectives (SO) 2.2, 5.1, and 4.1, highlighting both successes and areas for improvement compared to previous calls.

SO 2.2: Limited Success

For SO 2.2, the results were less than ideal, with only one out of seven submitted projects ultimately securing funding. This outcome suggests potential challenges within this specific area, which could range from the alignment of project proposals with the objective's criteria to the overall quality of applications. A deeper analysis of the unfunded projects for SO 2.2 will be crucial to understand the underlying reasons for this low success rate and to inform future strategies for improvement.

SO 5.1: Good Achievement

In contrast, SO 5.1 demonstrated remarkable success. Out of a total of 14 projects submitted, 10 projects that met both the eligibility criteria and the quality threshold will be financed. This represents



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a high success rate, indicating a good alignment between the objective's goals and the quality of proposals received. The performance in SO 5.1 suggests that this objective is well-defined, attracts high-caliber applications, and potentially benefits from a clear understanding among potential beneficiaries of its scope and requirements.

SO 4.1: Strategic Resource Allocation

Specific Objective 4.1 also saw positive developments. Initially, 16 projects passed the quality requirements. To further support this SO and capitalize on the strong pool of qualified applicants, additional financial resources will be allocated. This strategic decision will enable the financing of 7 projects, effectively moving the ranking list forward and allowing more meritorious projects to receive funding. This targeted injection of funds highlights a commitment to supporting promising initiatives within SO 4.1 and maximizing the impact of available resources.

Comparing these results to the first call, several key trends emerge:

Consistency for SO 2.2 and SO 5.1: The number of projects submitted for both SO 2.2 and SO 5.1 remained constant. While the sustained submission rate for SO 5.1 is favorable given its high success, the unchanging number for SO 2.2, coupled with its low funding rate, underscores the necessity for a comprehensive review and potential intervention concerning projects related to this objective.

Significant Growth for SO 4.1: A particularly noteworthy observation is the significant increase in projects submitted for SO 4.1 in this second edition of the Small-Scale Projects (SSPs). This surge in applications is attributed to the success of a targeted campaign specifically aimed at attracting newcomers and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). The campaign evidently played a crucial role in bringing potential beneficiaries closer to this specific objective, demonstrating the effectiveness of strategic outreach and engagement efforts.



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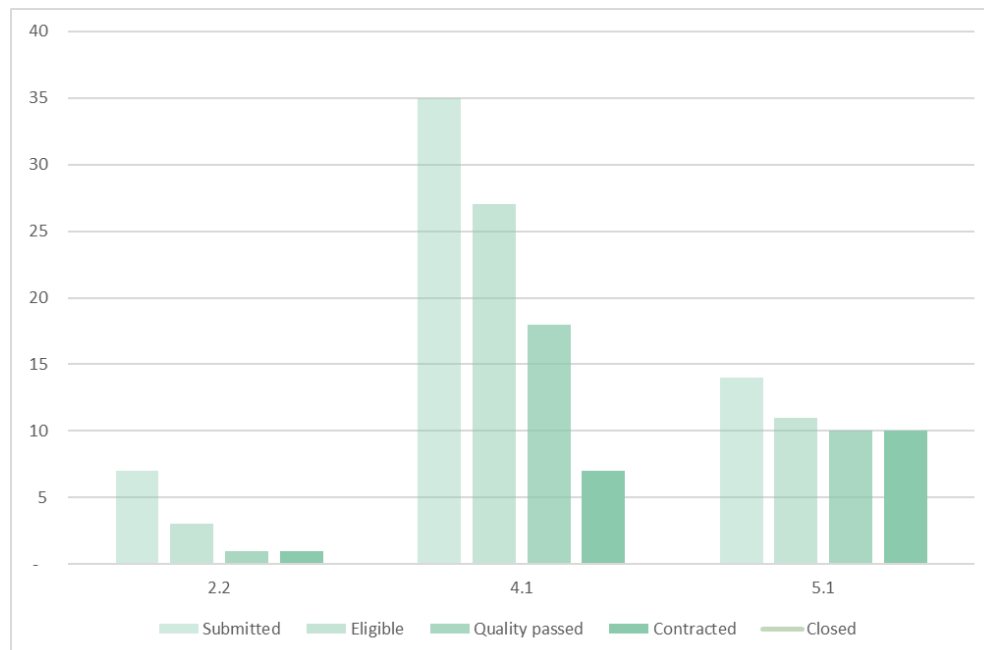


Figure 22: SSP Number of submitted, eligible, quality passed and contracted by SO

SO	Budget of the submitted projects	Budget of the eligible projects	PROPOSAL Budget of the quality passed projects	PROPOSAL Budget of the contracted projects	Final budget for the closed projects
2.2	1.809.759,00	748.992,00	267.432,00	267.432,00	
4.1	9.562.677,67	7.193.899,52	5.124.170,68	2.055.210,40	
5.1	3.919.659,92	3.100.570,16	2.800.328,66	2.800.328,66	
Total	15.292.096,59	11.043.461,68	8.191.931,34	5.122.971,06	-

Figure 23: SSP Budget distribution by category and SO, in Millions of Euros

1.2.5 Third Call of Proposals - Standard projects

The Programme's third call for proposals marked a substantial evolution in its approach to Standard Projects. Despite considerable challenges, including a budget reduction by half compared to the inaugural edition and a more concentrated targeting of project activities, this call achieved remarkable success.



Italy – Croatia

A detailed analysis of the call's outcomes reveals a compelling picture: the number of applications received was high, and the overall budget requested by these applications surpassed the figures recorded during the first standard call. This indicates a sustained and even heightened interest from potential project partners, despite the reduced financial resources available.

A key shift in this third call was the decision to deactivate Specific Objective (SO) 1.2. This measure was necessitated by the depletion of resources allocated to this objective in previous rounds. Conversely, Specific Objective (SO) 5.1 was newly introduced also for this kind of project. This addition was a direct response to the considerable success observed in the first edition of SSP call, suggesting a strategic move to build upon successful initiatives and channel resources into areas demonstrating high potential.

In terms of quantitative outcomes, the call attracted a total of 173 project proposals. These proposals collectively requested an astonishing 308 MEur, a figure starkly contrasted by the available budget of only 43.4 MEur. This substantial disparity underscores the immense demand for funding and the competitive nature of the call.

When examining the distribution of requests across the various Specific Objectives in relation to the available tendered resources, certain objectives stand out due to the significant gap between requested and allocated funds. SO 4.1 exhibited the largest such gap, indicating a particularly high level of interest and demand in this area. It was closely followed by SO 1.1 and all the SOs falling under Priority 2. This suggests that these areas are either critically important to the Programme's overall goals or represent sectors where there is a strong capacity for project development.

The SO 3.1, however, continued to register a comparatively small number of project proposals. This trend raises important questions, potentially suggesting a saturation of available offers within this domain, or highlighting persistent difficulties for new actors in proposing projects related to transport. Further investigation into these factors could inform future Programme design and outreach efforts.

Finally, SO 5.1 warrants a deeper and more nuanced analysis. While the regional response to this new objective appeared to be in line with the allocated resources, its overall success does not seem to have met initial expectations. This assessment is particularly salient when considering the slightly greater number of proposals that were contracted under the SSP of the first call. This observation suggests that while the concept behind SO 5.1 might be sound, its implementation or appeal may require refinement to achieve the desired level of impact and engagement seen in its SSP counterpart.



Italy – Croatia

SO	Original Call allocated budget	Submitted	Partners of the submitted projects	Budget of the submitted projects	Budget requested on Call allocated budget %
1.1	3.168.750,00	21	124	28.869.250,45	911,1%
1.2	-				
2.1	7.990.000,00	36	235	68.750.067,54	860,5%
2.2	7.990.000,00	33	211	64.613.142,07	808,7%
3.1	2.750.000,00	8	53	11.548.789,48	420,0%
4.1	11.482.500,00	63	419	119.358.089,74	1039,5%
5.1	10.067.500,00	12	69	15.038.950,65	149,4%
Total	43.448.750,00	173	1.111,00	308.178.289,93	709,3%

Figure 24: Standard Projects Budget distribution by category, numbers of projects submitted and partners by SO, in Millions of Euros

1.3 Focus on legal status and types of beneficiary

The analysis of participation across the different calls for proposals reveals a dynamic shift in engagement between public and private entities. This table specifically highlights the changes observed between the 1st and 3rd calls for both Small-Scale and Standard projects.

Partner legal status	Small-scale projects 1st Call	Small-Scale projects 3rd Call	Growth rate	Standard 1st Call	Standard 3rd Call	Growth rate
Public / BGPL	51	93	+82%	885	801	-9%
Private	46	85	+85%	220	310	+41%
Total	97	178	84%	1.105	1.111	0,01%

Figure 25: Legal status of beneficiaries and changes observed between Calls



Italy – Croatia

Small-Scale Projects:

- **Public Participation:** In the SSP category, public entity participation saw a substantial increase, rising from 51 participants in the 1st Call to 93 in the 3rd Call. This represents an impressive growth rate of +82%.
- **Private Participation:** Private entity involvement in Small-Scale projects demonstrated even stronger growth. Their numbers surged from 46 in the 1st Call to 85 in the 3rd Call, indicating an 85% increase.
- **Overall Small-Scale Growth:** Collectively, Small-Scale projects experienced an overall participation increase of 84%, growing from a total of 97 participants in the 1st Call to 178 in the 3rd Call. This significant expansion underscores the growing appeal and accessibility of these projects to both sectors.

Standard Projects:

- **Public Participation:** In contrast to Small-Scale projects, public participation in Standard projects experienced a slight decline. The number of public entities decreased from 885 in the 1st Call to 801 in the 3rd Call, a modest reduction of -9%.
- **Private Participation:** The Standard project category witnessed a robust increase in private sector engagement. Private participation grew from 220 in the 1st Call to 310 in the 3rd Call, marking a significant +41% growth rate. This indicates a strong and increasing interest from private organizations in larger-scale initiatives.
- **Overall Participation:** Despite the decrease in public involvement, the total number of participants in Standard projects remained relatively consistent due to the contributions of the private sector.

The data highlights a clear trend: **private sector engagement is growing significantly** across both types of calls, particularly in the Small-Scale Call, which shows an increase of 85%.

Such overall increase of approximately 7,2% across all calls is largely attributable to the expanding involvement of the private sector demonstrating both the Programme's enhanced appeal and the private sector's growing willingness and ability to support these project proposals. While both public and private entities remain essential, the data points to a marked dynamism from the private sector, contributing strongly to overall participation growth.

The share of applicants from the private sector has grown notably between the first and third calls as shown in the two accompanying pie charts. This trend is also a key indicator of the Programme's evolving dynamics and successful outreach strategies.



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The gray segment in the chart shows that Enterprises, including SMEs, grew from 7% to 10% of total beneficiary composition while the private non-profit sector (including organizations such as NGOs), expanded from 6% to 11%. This expansion in private and third-sector participation has primarily occurred at the expense of non-local public authorities whose share declined from 18% to 9%. This rebalancing of applicant types strongly suggests that the Programme's deliberate "efforts to attract the private sector and the third sector" are yielding tangible results.

Another factor contributing to this shift is the engagement of many of the long-standing public beneficiaries in the **OSI projects** that might have limited their participation in the recent calls and opened space for the entrance of new sectors.

Future calls could better benefit from this approach of keeping OSI separate from the other call.

This strategy could also help to maintain a diverse and balanced portfolio of projects, drawing on the unique expertise and resources offered by both public and private entities.

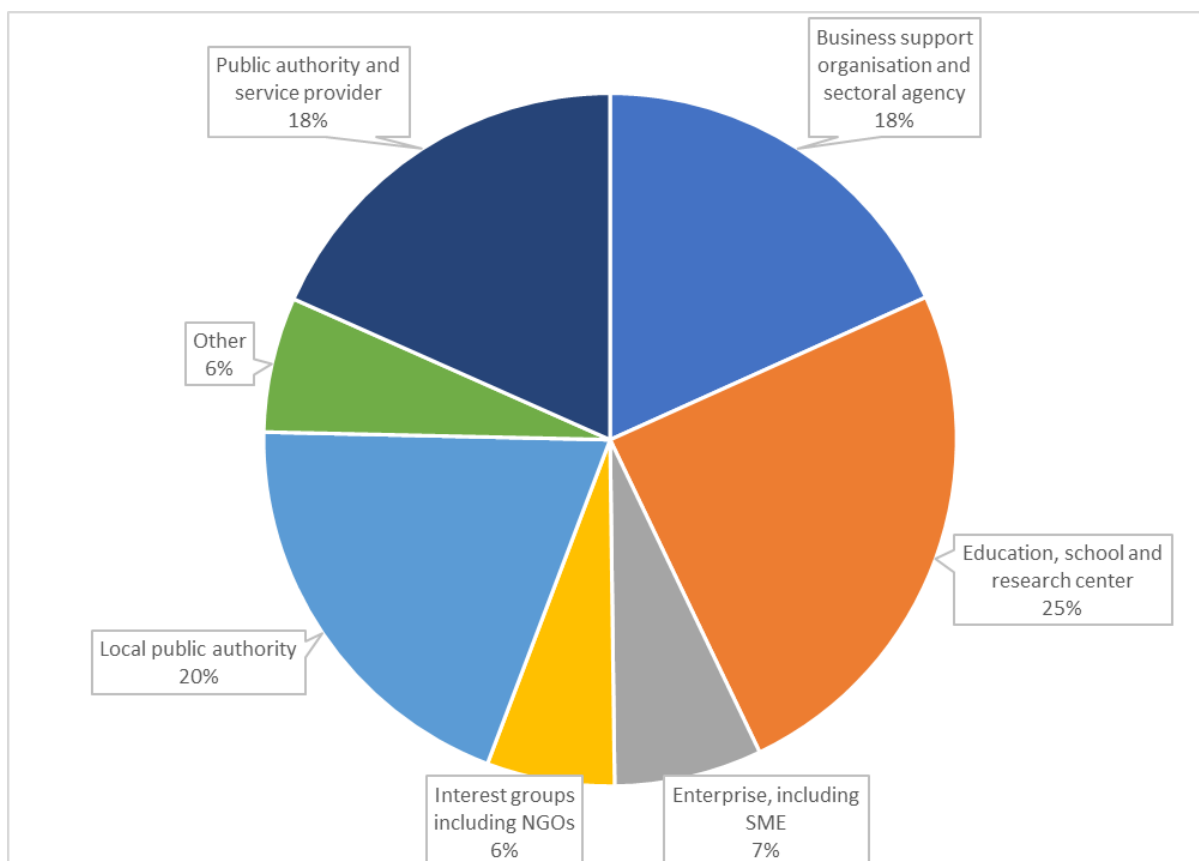


Figure 26: Legal status of applicants of the first Call for Proposals



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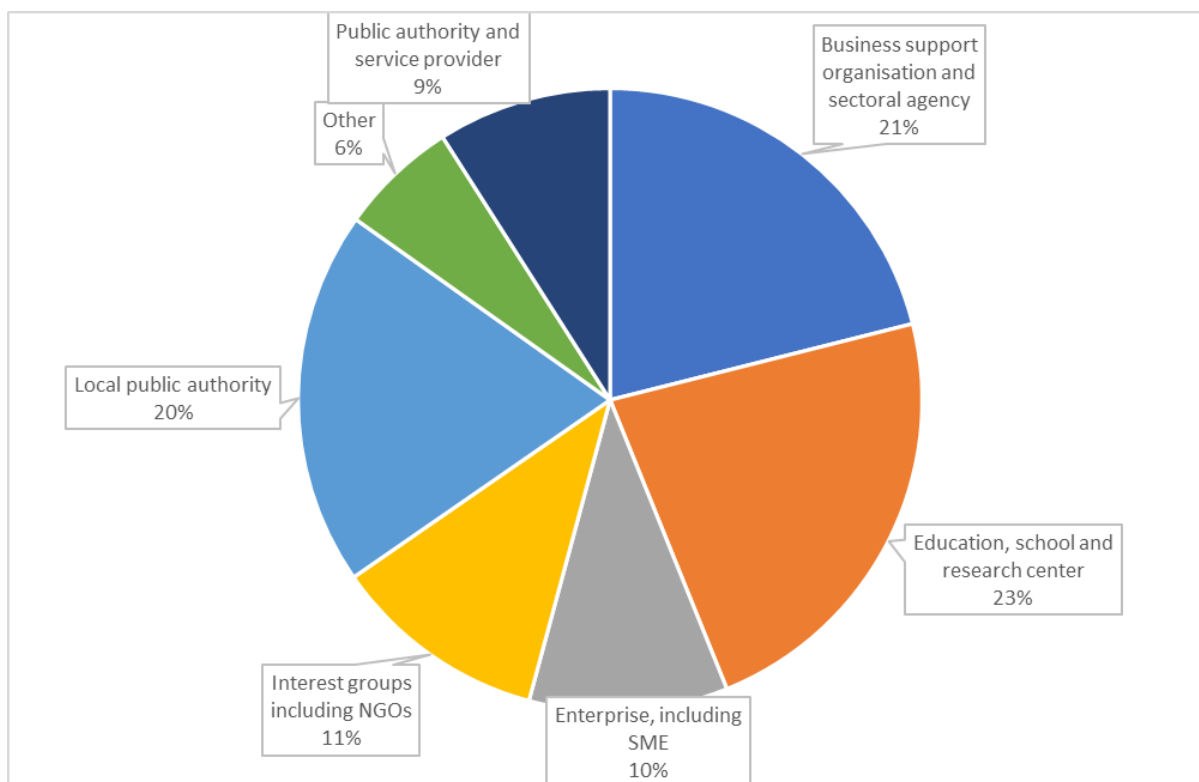


Figure 27: Legal status of applicants of the third Call for Proposals

1.4 Focus on Newcomers

Another goal of the Programme was to attract a greater number of new participants, given the strong tendency observed in the previous programming period to involve the same beneficiaries in multiple projects.

To achieve this goal, the Programme intensified communication and introduced additional constraints and scoring for projects involving new entities in the partnerships.

This combination of measures gave an excellent response: out of 178 participations in the partnerships of the SSPs submitted with the third call, 122 were new participants, representing 68.5%. Considering the unique number of potential beneficiaries, this percentage increases to 71.8%, underscoring the success of this call in attracting new members.



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Newcomer or already involved in previous Calls	Participation (count)	Participation (%)	Unique beneficiary (count)	Unique beneficiary (%)
Involved in 14-20 projects	8	4,49%	8	5,37%
Involved in 21-27 projects	48	26,97%	34	22,82%
Newcomers	122	68,54%	107	71,81%
Total	178	100,00%	149	100,00%

Figure 28: SSP Total Number of Newcomers involved across the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 project periods.

Furthermore, the pie chart shows the percentage distribution of new applicants, underscoring their influence on the Programme's overall composition. Specifically, private entities account for 47% of the newcomers.

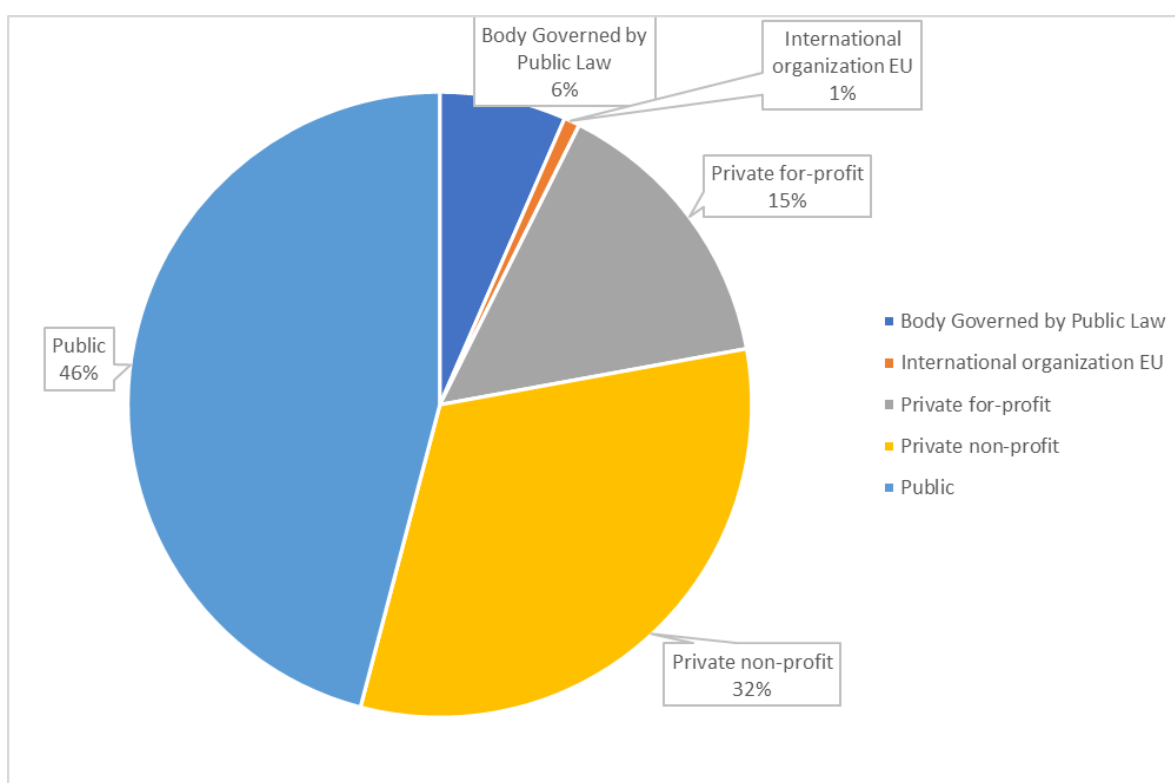


Figure 29: SSP Legal status of newcomers for the third Call for Proposals



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Noteworthy is the substantial participation of newcomers in the Call dedicated to Standard projects, with this group comprising nearly 40% of the total participants. Even more striking is the statistic concerning unique beneficiaries, where newcomers account for almost 60% of the aggregate. This suggests that, while approximately 200 established entities engage in multiple projects, new participants, in their initial experience, tend to submit only one project.

Newcomer or already involved in previous Calls	Participation (count)	Participation (%)	Unique beneficiary (count)	Unique beneficiary (%)
Involved in 14-20 projects	71	6,39%	46	7,65%
Involved in 21-27 projects	622	55,99%	207	34,44%
Newcomers	418	37,62%	348	57,90%
Total	1.111	100,00%	601	100,00%

Figure 30: Standard Projects Total Number of Newcomers involved across the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 project periods.

As observed in the SSP projects, Standard projects also exhibit a significant prevalence of private for-profit and non-profit entities, which account for 44% of the total newcomers, in the distribution of potential "newcomer" beneficiaries by legal status.



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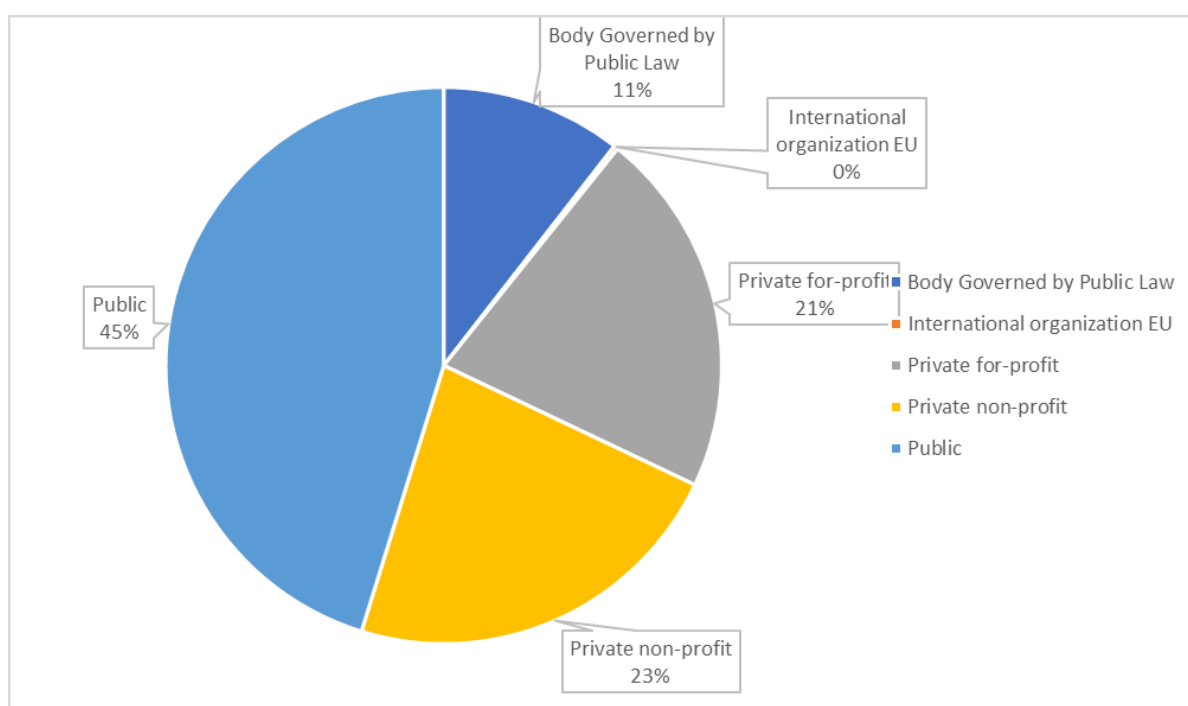


Figure 31: Standard Projects Legal status of newcomers for the third Call for Proposals



Chapter 2 Effectiveness and Efficiency

2.1 introduction

This chapter outlines the main results of the assessment of the Programme's performance in the Call for Proposals procedures. The Third Call for Proposals of the Italy-Croatia Programme was designed also on the basis of a gap analysis conducted by the JS and the lessons learnt from the first operational evaluation of the Programme. Together, these assessments provided a comprehensive picture of the challenges encountered in the first two Calls and guided the introduction of corrective measures in the 3rd Call.

2.2 Gap analysis

In preparation of the 3rd Call for proposals for two typologies of projects, Standard and Small-scale projects, the JS analysed the performance of projects from the First Call and the Second Call (OSI). The gap analysis focused on the thematic focus, quality and coverage of the projects financed under the previous calls, as well as lessons learnt from their management and implementation. The objective is to identify thematic and operational gaps to inform the design and priorities of the next call for proposals. In particular, the analysis focused on:

- Achievement of output and result indicators;
- Spending targets across territories;
- Implementation bottlenecks.

The gap analysis starts with an overview of the main focus and trends from previous calls, as to verify how the territories responded to the call financial allocation with project proposals in the different SOs and their overall quality. Quantitative performance indicators were excluded from this assessment, as current data show that the Programme is on track to meet or exceed its output and result targets.

The analysis highlights also the specific IP actions that have been insufficiently addressed so far. Within S.O. 1.1, there is a need to strengthen actions related to researcher mobility, technology access for SMEs, and private sector engagement in innovation. In S.O. 2.1, significant gaps remain in awareness-raising, community-based adaptation initiatives, and cross-border cooperation for emergency management. S.O. 2.2 shows room for improvement in integrated land-sea management, common monitoring systems, and the adoption of innovative pollution control measures. While S.O. 3.1 (transport) appears well covered, S.O. 4.1 (tourism and culture) presents weaknesses in actions linked to training and skills, social inclusion, cooperation among tourism operators, and the economic sustainability of cultural sites. Finally, S.O. 5.1 (governance) displays consistent gaps in tackling administrative and legal barriers to cross-border cooperation and in developing digital public services and governance models.



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To address these imbalances, the report proposes introducing bonus points in the quality assessment of new project proposals that explicitly target the underdeveloped actions identified in the analysis. This incentive would help fill the thematic gaps without excluding already well-covered areas, thus ensuring a more balanced and comprehensive coverage of the IP objectives.

The final section of the report reflects on the lessons learnt from project implementation. Among the main challenges, the Programme identified the limited involvement of young people (aged 13–30), frequent inconsistencies between project-level and programme-level intervention logics, and lengthy condition-clearing procedures. For small-scale projects, additional bottlenecks were found, including fragmented work packages, overly complex application forms, weak communication strategies, and financial difficulties due to slow reimbursement processes. Many of these issues stemmed from the inexperience of smaller organisations and newcomers to Interreg cooperation.

To overcome these obstacles, several corrective measures are proposed and the analysis leads to identifying specific corrective measures. These include:

Cross-cutting Issues (Standard & SSP Projects)

- Youth involvement too limited → Proposals must explicitly target young people (13–30 years) with dedicated activities.
- Misalignment of intervention logic → New guidance on project logic, indicators, and targets.
- Inefficient clearing procedures → Conditions will only apply to binding requirements.

Small-Scale Project (SSP) Specific Issues

- Fragmentation of activities → Restrict SSPs to a defined typology of activities:
 - Analyses (studies, surveys, gap analyses)
 - Agreements (MoUs, strategies, action plans)
 - Meetings (workshops, conferences, study visits)
 - Tools (websites, apps, databases) in relation to the limited financing
- Complex application forms → Simplify the AF forms, reduce character limits, streamline criteria.
- Unsuitable indicators → Exclude “Joint solutions” from SSP proposals
- Weak communication → Make compulsory these communication outputs:
 - at least 5 website/social media items per month;
 - One professionally produced visual (e.g., video, infographic).
- Limited newcomer participation (NGOs, youth organisations, small municipalities, schools, marinas)



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- Award extra points to proposals including newcomers (partners that have never participated in 2014-20 or 2021-27 IT-HR before) and require from the Lead applicant specific activities to support and build up Interreg management capacities of the newcomers;
 - Award extra points to S.O. 3.1) proposals involving non-governmental bodies, such as non-profit associations, youth organisations, secondary schools and small marinas
 - Restrict eligibility of central and regional authorities, universities and municipalities with more than 50.000 inhabitants
 - Introduce a compulsory public hearing/interview with lead applicants (10% of quality score);
- Administrative and financial burdens → Reduce administrative burden for small projects by
- Allowing only simplified cost options (no equipment/infrastructure)
 - Reducing the reimbursement procedures
 - Reducing number of reports/payment procedures
 - Enforcing earlier DURC checks and controller appointments.

Summary of Adjustments

For Standard Projects, the main adjustments focus on better youth involvement, clearer intervention logic, and simplified conditions.

For Small-Scale Projects, the measures address fragmentation, administrative burden, unrealistic indicators, weak communication, limited capacity of small/private actors, and financial flow issues. Simplification and stricter focus on eligible activities are the central corrective actions.

Overall, the Gap Analysis report concludes that the Programme has achieved a solid performance in its early implementation phase, with high levels of demand and promising project quality. Nonetheless, thematic imbalances, recurring administrative challenges, and the underrepresentation of new and small actors still limit the full potential of cross-border cooperation. The third call is therefore expected to refine focus, enhance inclusiveness, and ensure a more strategic alignment of resources and project activities with the Programme's long-term objectives.

2.3 Lessons Learnt from the first Operational Evaluation

The first internal operational evaluation of the Interreg Italy-Croatia Programme 2021–2027 was conducted by the MA internal staff shortly after the closure of the first Call for Proposals. The evaluation focused on the project selection process of the first Call for Proposal and the use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) aiming to identify gaps that might impact upcoming calls. A key objective was to determine whether any administrative, cultural, or procedural barriers hindered



Italy – Croatia

access to the Programme, particularly for newcomers. Where such barriers were identified, recommendations were proposed to overcome them. This process involved a structured series of steps:

1. The Consensus Method started with the MA and stakeholders agreeing on the objective: to prioritize impactful and feasible improvements based on Call for Proposals feedback, establishing a shared purpose.
2. During the Creative Phase, participants brainstormed individually and silently, recording potential improvements and actions suggested by feedback to maximize idea breadth and prevent dominant voices from suppressing initial suggestions.
3. Ideas were sorted, publicly presented, clarified, and grouped into thematic categories (e.g., administrative burden, communication, data collection, partner support) to remove redundancies and structure suggestions.
4. During the critical ranking phase, participants confidentially scored actions based on Importance (impact on Programme quality and applicant satisfaction) and Feasibility (ease and cost of implementation). This structured voting, a key element of the Nominal Group Technique, produced a quantitative priority list from aggregated scores.
5. Eight top-ranked, highly important, and feasible actions were selected for implementation in the next programming phases.

Key findings from this evaluation include:

1. Access Barriers Identified and Addressed: the evaluation confirmed that newcomers participated in large numbers, particularly in Small-Scale projects, but also faced specific barriers including lack of partner search tools, application complexity, and limited guidance on eligibility and expected outputs.
2. Administrative Process Review: the evaluation highlighted areas where the Programme successfully streamlined processes, such as with the JEMS system, while also identifying continued complexity in the application forms and inconsistent use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs).
3. Communication Improvements: participants appreciated the role of Programme websites and info days but emphasized the need for enhanced outreach through social media, sectoral channels, and clearer documentation.
4. Newcomer Support and Inclusion: the findings confirmed that structural and cultural support for newcomers remains essential. While some newcomers managed to submit quality proposals, many found the documentation overwhelming or misunderstood key eligibility requirements.



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These findings were further validated and prioritized by importance and feasibility. The recommended actions that reached a higher consensus, both for importance and feasibility are:

1. Boost the social media to disseminate Programme activities such as opening calls and update regularly about the evaluation procedure to increase stakeholder engagement:

The action to boost social media activities was deemed a highly relevant and instrumental strategy for reaching and engaging beneficiaries of the 3rd Call for Proposals. This relevance was further corroborated by a survey, in which participants ranked social media as the third most useful channel for learning about the project, after the Website and Infodays. It is also important to note the relationship between these channels: almost all applicants who selected social media also selected the Programme Website. This suggests that social media primarily functions as an entry point, driving users to the more detailed, comprehensive information available on the official Programme Website.

2. Use more sectorial agencies such as Confindustria, Confartigianato, Regional Development Agencies, to enlarge innovative enterprises' participation in the Programme:

The strategic objective to engage more sectorial agencies, specifically Confindustria, Confartigianato, and Regional Development Agencies, for the purpose of enlarging innovative enterprises' participation in the Programme demonstrated limited success. Analysis of participant feedback revealed that this particular outreach channel was largely ineffective. The data indicated that most participants did not cite these agencies as their source of information about the Programme. This finding suggests that while the use of such established bodies was a logical approach for expanding the Programme's reach, they did not function as a primary or successful dissemination channel for the target audience. The sub-optimal outcome highlights the need to re-evaluate the effectiveness of these partnerships in reaching innovative enterprises and to consider alternative or supplementary engagement strategies for future initiatives.

3. Creation of video info pills on some call requirements (such as eligibility or quality criteria, indicators, and project typology):

Following a successful implementation, participants in 3rd Call for Proposals found that video tutorials were considered "very useful" in both Standard (4.42/5) and Small Scale (4.8/5) surveys.



Italy – Croatia

4. Focus more on the results: the creation of a document with minimum standards definitions for project outputs; and a library with good practice examples:

To ensure a high level of quality across all projects, a document defining minimum standards for project outputs and a library of good practice examples have been developed. This initiative was completed following the 1st Call for Proposals and is readily accessible on the official Programme Website. These resources serve as essential guidelines for all project teams, promoting consistency and excellence from the outset. The survey results confirm the value of these resources. Notably, the output guidelines were not cited as a critical issue by any respondents. Furthermore, the Glossary scored highly on usefulness, receiving a 4/5 from Small Scale applicants and 3.9/5 from Standard applicants. While perhaps not the top-rated tool, these strong scores affirm its significant benefit to applicants.

5. Publish a single Programme document "Application Package" for every call including indicators, and project implementation relevant data. E.g., aggregate call documents (for intervention logic and synergies), and facilitate recall of the documents:

To streamline the application process and enhance clarity for all applicants, the Programme bodies have implemented a comprehensive single Programme document for each call. Known as the "Application Package," this document consolidates all essential information, including the call announcement, guidelines for applicants, various templates, and other key documents. It effectively aggregates previously separate documents, which are now all in a single, cohesive resource, available in the "Application" section of the Programme. The applicants rated the Application Package very highly in the recent survey: Small Scale applicants rated it 4.37/5, and Standard applicants rated it 4/5. Furthermore, the document was not mentioned as a critical issue by any respondents in the survey.

6. Anticipate priorities and contents of the upcoming calls in congruous advance:

The communication campaign began only after the Call for Proposals opened. Moving forward, we must anticipate the priorities and contents of upcoming calls and ensure the campaign starts in advance of the opening date.

7. Improve the existing tool integrating it with a database of beneficiaries with their curricula. E.g., a function where potential beneficiaries can be aware of the ongoing designing projects, candidates for one, and publish a "Call for interest":



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To improve collaboration and streamline the project design process, the existing partner search tool has been significantly enhanced. This improved version now integrates a comprehensive database of beneficiaries with their curricula, providing a richer overview of potential partners. A new function has been introduced to facilitate project development, allowing potential beneficiaries to gain awareness of projects that are currently in the design phase. This feature enables organizations to proactively identify suitable partners for collaboration. Furthermore, the tool now includes the ability to publish a "Call for interest" directly on the Programme Website, simplifying the process of attracting qualified candidates and fostering more effective project teams. This upgrade aims to connect partners more efficiently and support the development of high-quality proposals.

The partner search functionality has been met with no adverse commentary, which, coupled with its highly positive utility ratings of 4.36/5 in the standard survey and 4.2/5 in the small-scale survey, confirms its successful implementation and value to applicants. The tool is demonstrably effective and well-received by the user base. Despite this strong performance, the user feedback showed a continued demand for a stronger partner search utility and requests for additional in-person networking events. This suggests that while the existing digital solution is appreciated, it has not fundamentally solved the overarching problem of collaboration efficacy, compelling applicants to seek further structural and physical support to meet their partnership needs.

8. In JEMS create a warning block if mandatory documents are missing:

The warning block for missing mandatory documents was implemented in JEMS. Significantly, no user reported an issue with this feature in the subsequent survey.

Conclusions

The gap analysis conducted by the JS and the first internal operational evaluation have provided comprehensive insights into the efficiency, relevance, and accessibility of the Programme's first Calls for Proposals, specifically for Small-Scale and Standard projects.

The elaboration of the third Call for Proposal, launched in 2025, benefited from these analyses and was guided towards greater clarity, inclusiveness, and efficiency. By simplifying procedures, focusing SSPs on defined activities, strengthening communication, and supporting newcomers, the Programme aims to maximise participation, reduce burdens, and improve the overall impact of cross-border cooperation.



2.4 Results from the online surveys on first and 3rd Calls for Proposals

Interreg Programme VI-A Italy-Croatia 2021-2027 submitted a survey to every JEMS user who showed interest in the Call for Proposals. They were sent to both those who finalized the Application Form submission and to those who just opened a draft and did not proceed for any reason, to be investigated. These surveys are part of a series of internal monitoring conducted immediately following the closure of every Call for Proposals. They are included into a wider set of investigative tools tackling different aspects of the IT-HR Programme's offer to both the beneficiaries and applicants that will be developed in the different phases of the programme-projects lifecycle. The on-line survey aimed in particular at assessing whether the corrective measure introduced in the 3rd Call proved to be effective

The surveys consisted of a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions and had the following characteristics:

- timely: in order not to lose the interest of potential applicants who did not finalise the application as it would happen if contacted later on (after the application selection phase or during the projects lifecycle) with deeper surveys;
- It should have a mix of open-closed non-mandatory questions, so the previous structure was kept to tackle the wide spectrum of potential applicants and of the reasons behind their possible difficulties.

The survey conducted on the 1st Call for Proposals provided crucial insights into the applicant experience, allowing to implement targeted improvements to the survey conducted on the 3rd Call for Proposals:

During the 1st Call for Proposals, the survey window was only six businesses. Feedback from participants indicated this was not enough time. Based on this feedback, the survey window for the 3rd Call for Proposals was extended to 9 business days, 50% more days than the previous time frame.

For the 3rd Call for Proposals, the survey notice period was shortened from 30 to 16 days to optimize feedback. Surveys were published on EUSurvey from July 22 to August 1, 2025, with a reminder sent five days after publication to increase response rates.

For the 3rd Call for Proposals, differently from the previous one for critical topics it was decided to mark the questions as “mandatory” despite the loss of flexibility to avoid the loss of some interesting data as survey participants chose not to answer some of the questions. For example, 4 out of 45 (8.8%) people did not respond to the question “Did you find the application and submission process easy?” and this most likely led to the loss of useful data.



2.4.1 Analysis of the results of the Survey on the Small-Scale call

SSP Respondent Profile

A comparison of the survey data for the 1st and 3rd Call for Proposals reveals interesting shifts in the demographics of new applicants. In the 1st Call for Proposals, the overall survey sample was evenly split between Italians and Croatians. This balance was somewhat reflected in the newcomer group, where Italian participants made up 62.5% and Croatians accounted for 37.5%. 3rd Call for Proposals, however, shows a stronger Italian presence, both in the general survey population and among newcomers. The survey results show that a significant majority of respondents, 77.78%, were Italian. This trend is even more pronounced within the newcomer category, where Italians represented 90% of the group, a slight increase from the 1st Call for Proposals, with 18 of the 20 newcomers being Italian and only two being Croatian.

Thanks to the lessons learned from our previous surveys, a significant increase was achieved in participation. The MA received 45 replies out of 146 invitations, which represents a response rate of 30.82%, an increase of over 50% compared to the last survey's 21.42%.

Response Rate

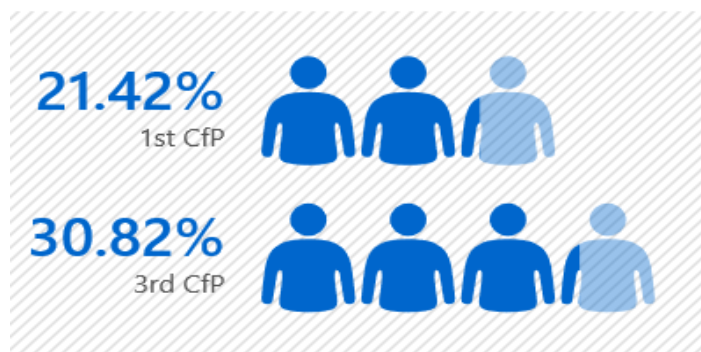


Figure 32: Response rate across Calls

SSP Awareness of the Call

The data shows a shift in how potential applicants learned about the Small-Scale Projects' Calls for Proposals. In the 1st Call for Proposals the Programme Website was the most common source of information, but it was a more modest majority at 44.44%. Infodays were also a strong second, with 27.78% of respondents. For newcomers, the Website was even more critical, while social media and infodays had minimal impact.



Italy – Croatia

In the 3rd Call for Proposals the data reveals more reliance on the Website. The percentage of respondents who became aware of the call through the Programme Website jumped to a dominant 47.14%. While Infodays remained the second most popular source with 21.42%. Other sources like the Newsletter (8.57%) and social media (15.71%) were less influential.

Despite only 16% of 3rd Call for Proposals respondents selecting social media, nearly all also used the Programme Website, suggesting social media may act as an initial awareness point, leading users to the website for details. Social media's importance is growing, increasing from 5.56% of responses in the 1st Call for Proposals to 16.00% by the 3rd Call for Proposals. "Other" sources consistently referred to internal communication.

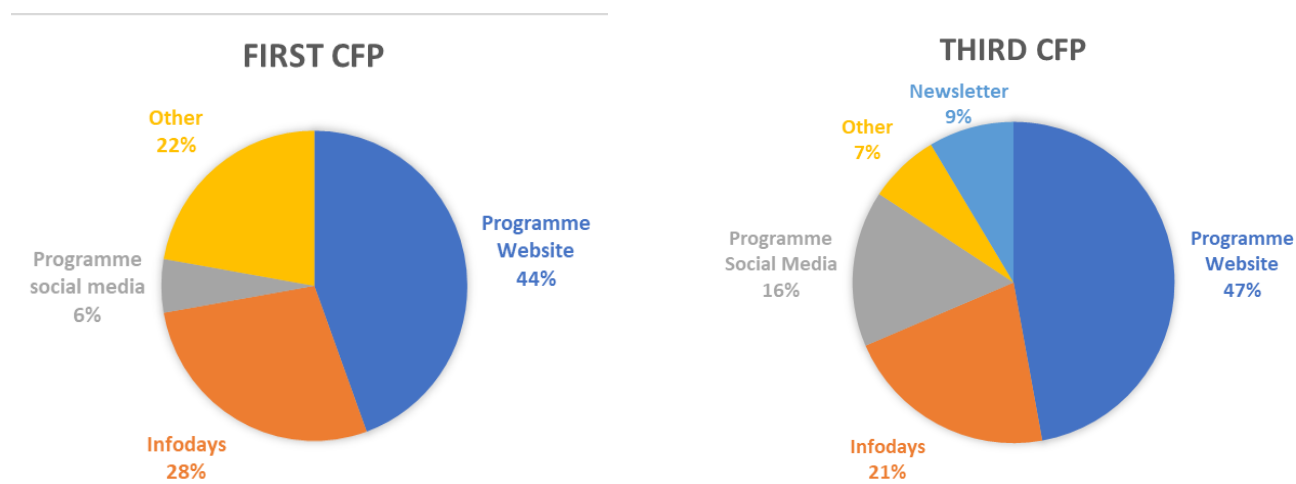


Figure 33 and 34: SSP Answers to the question "Where did you learn about the first Call for Proposal?" and "Where did you learn about the third Call for Proposal?"

SSP Application experience

There was a remarkable jump in the percentage of respondents who found the process easy. In the 1st Call for Proposals, 55.56% of applicants found it easy, but this figure soared to 91.11% in the 3rd Call for Proposals. This shows that the vast majority of applicants were satisfied with the streamlined process.

The feedback from the two calls also varied greatly. In the 1st Call for Proposals, a variety of suggestions were provided, especially from newcomers. These included simplifying the application form, establishing a partner search platform, and clarifying eligibility. The 3rd Call for Proposals data, however, states that no suggestions for improvement were provided by the majority of respondents.



Italy – Croatia

The only person who still found the process difficult provided a highly detailed and critical comment, citing issues with increased bureaucracy, redundant manuals, and poorly timed deadlines, particularly in Croatia.

While both data sets mention challenges, the nature of the feedback is different. The 1st Call for Proposals feedback was more general, mentioning "excessive complexity" and a "short application timeframe." The 3rd Call for Proposals feedback, on the other hand, was much more specific and critical, detailing issues like "unnecessary administrative requirements" and "unclear and fragmented procedures." This suggests that while the process improved for the majority, the remaining pain points for a minority of users were more significant and systemic.

In summary, the 3rd Call for Proposals was overwhelmingly perceived as a much simpler application process by most users. However, the one critical comment it received was more detailed and specific than the feedback from the 1st Call for Proposals, suggesting that while the process improved for the majority, the remaining pain points for a minority of users were more significant and systemic.

SSP Suggestions to Improve the Process

The suggestions for improving the application process from the 1st Call for Proposals and the 3rd Call for Proposals show a clear evolution from broad, project-specific feedback to a more general, systemic critique focused on improving the overall user experience.

The suggestions from the 1st Call for Proposals were highly practical and focused on resolving specific issues within the application itself. They asked for tangible changes like:

- Dedicated guidance for specific sections of the form (e.g., communication activities).
- More explicit documentation that clearly defines what constitutes a "small-scale project" and its expected outputs.
- The application form should be shortened and simplified.
- The use of Simplified Cost Option No. 2 be revised.

In contrast, the suggestions from the 3rd Call for Proposals were more high-level and strategic, focusing less on the form's content and more on the infrastructure and support around the application process. These suggestions included the need for:

- Stronger partner search support, indicating that the difficulty of finding partners remained a major obstacle.
- More modern communication materials.
- More guidance earlier in the process.
- Clearer overall instructions.



Italy – Croatia

While both sets of feedback mention simplification, the 3rd Call for Proposals shifted the focus from simplifying the form itself to simplifying the entire user journey. The suggestions moved from "fix this document" to "improve the system and communication." This may reflect a maturing applicant pool that has moved beyond basic application challenges and is now looking for more sophisticated, systemic improvements to the Programme's support and digital tools.

SSP Positive features

The data from the 3rd Call for Proposals survey shows that the most appreciated feature of the SSP was Simplified Cost Options, which received positive feedback from 55.56% of respondents. The Relevance of Topics Covered and Activities Financed were also highly appreciated, with 42.22% and 40.00% of responses, respectively.

Simplified Cost Options and Activities Financed were also appreciated in the 1st Call for Proposals, but at lower percentages (38.89% and 33.33%) than in the 3rd Call for Proposals. The least appreciated aspects in the 1st Call for Proposals were Project Duration (27.78%) and Topics Covered (22.22%).

In summary both surveys show appreciation for Simplified Cost Options and Activities Financed as these features received a higher percentage of positive responses in the 3rd Call for Proposals.

2.4.2 Analysis of the results of the Survey on the Standard Call

Standard Respondent Profile

Both surveys showed a dominant representation from Italy, with the 1st Call for Proposals survey reporting 59.7% Italian respondents and the 3rd Call for Proposals showing a slight increase to 63.35%. The Programme maintained a consistent and notable appeal to first-time applicants. The 1st Call for Proposals survey found that 41.6% of respondents were first-time applicants, a figure that remained consistent at 40.72% for the 3rd Call for Proposals.

Based on lessons from the 1st Call for Proposals, several key changes were implemented to optimize the feedback process. The survey window was extended by 50% (from six to nine business days after the proposal deadline) and significantly shortened the waiting period before publication (from 30 to 16 days after the Call for Proposals closure). Additionally, a reminder was sent to participants five days after the survey was published on July 22nd. In spite of these adjustments, the overall participation rate remained highly stable. The MA received 221 replies out of 500 invitations, yielding a 44.2% response rate, which closely matched the 46.21% rate from the previous survey.



Response rate



Figure 35: Response rate across Calls

Standard Awareness of the Call

The Programme Website was the dominant channel through which participants first learned about the Call for Proposals, even with a decline in use. While 53% of respondents cited it in the 1st Call for Proposals, this figure decreased to 41.55% in the 3rd Call for Proposals. Despite the drop, the Website clearly maintained its status as the single most popular source of initial discovery. Though Infodays were a key channel for nearly a quarter of respondents 24.63% in the 1st Call for Proposals, their popularity remained stable in the 3rd Call for Proposals, securing 24.38% of responses. Social media's contribution grew steadily, moving from 6% in the 1st Call for Proposals to 10% in the 3rd Call for Proposals.



Italy – Croatia

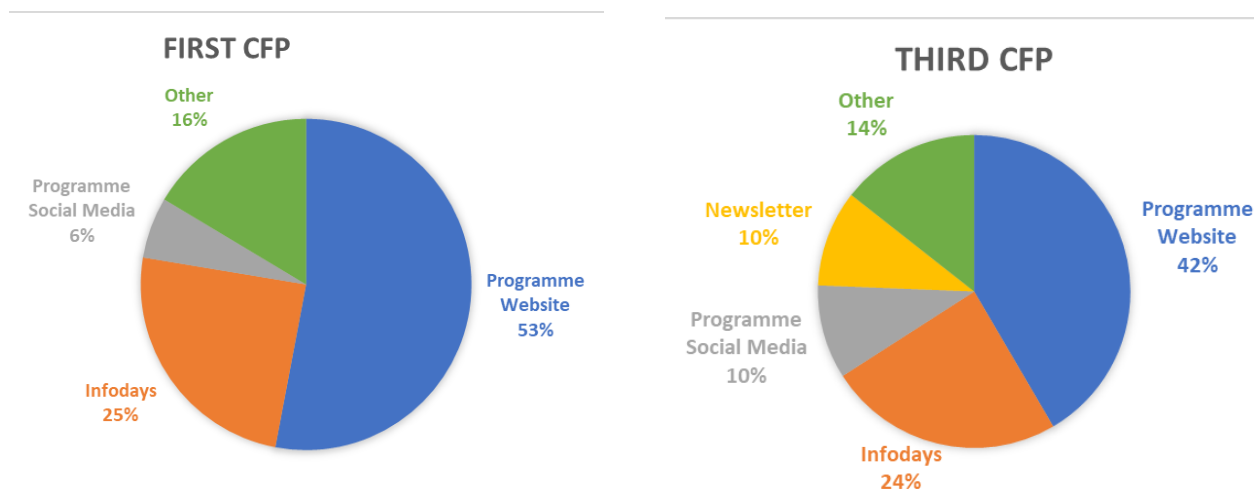


Figure 36 and 37: Standard Projects Answers to the question “Where did you learn about the first Call for Proposal?” and “Where did you learn about the third Call for Proposal?”

Standard Application experience

The 3rd Call for Proposals saw a marked increase in positive feedback regarding the application process. In the 1st Call for Proposals, a strong majority of respondents (76.12%) found the AF submission easy. This figure climbed to nearly all respondents in the 3rd Call for Proposals, with 92.76% reporting the process was easy.

While the percentage of those who found the process difficult dropped, a new insight from the 3rd Call for Proposals survey highlights that a notable number of newcomers (8) were among the 16 respondents who still struggled. In the 1st Call for Proposals, newcomers' feedback was consistent with that of experienced applicants, but the 3rd Call for Proposals data points to a specific subgroup that may need additional support. In the 1st Call for Proposals, a high percentage of newcomers 91% successfully finalized and submitted their Application Form (AF). This figure appears to have improved, as the non-submission rate in the 3rd Call for Proposals was just 3.3% (3 out of 90 newcomers).

Standard Suggestions to improve the Process

The 1st Call for Proposals survey included suggestions for:

- The implementation of a partner search tool
- Reduce the overall length and rigidity of the application's process.

In the 3rd Call for Proposals survey, a new set of suggestions emerged, focusing more on:



Italy – Croatia

- Reducing administrative burden and the amount of documentation required.
- Simplifying the project budget component.

In the 1st Call for Proposals, participants who did not submit their AF cited issues directly related to the application process itself. The key barriers included the complexity of the application form, difficulty in finding suitable partners (mentioned by 50% of this group), and insufficient time for preparation. Their feedback also highlighted a broader sense of administrative frustration, with comments on the bureaucratic burden, rigid rules, and the overall length and complexity of the form.

The reasons for non-submission in the 3rd Call for Proposals were entirely external to the application process. The six participants who did not submit their AF cited personal or internal organizational issues. Their feedback points to a reliance on colleagues or administrative offices to handle submissions, with reasons such as "It has been filled by our administrative office" or "the proposal was submitted by another university researcher." There were no comments regarding the complexity of the form, administrative burden, or lack of time.

Standard Positive Features

Respondents consistently viewed both the Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) and the relevance of topics as the most positive aspects of the calls. The support for both of these features grew significantly from the 1st Call for Proposals to the 3rd Call for Proposals. In the 1st Call for Proposals, 27% of respondents appreciated the SCOs, and 25% found the topics relevant. These figures surged to 42.08% for both categories in the 3rd Call for Proposals, indicating that these elements became even more valued by participants over time.

A notable difference in the 3rd Call for Proposals is the inclusion of several additional positive aspects that were not highlighted in the 1st Call for Proposals. These included the project duration (14.03%) and the activities financed (23.98%). This broader range of positive feedback suggests that the 3rd Call for Proposals was more successful in meeting a wider variety of participant needs, moving beyond just the core elements of SCOs and topic relevance.

2.4.3 Conclusions

Methodological improvements

The key feedback suggests two main areas for improvement: refining the Programme's administrative framework and enhancing its data collection reliability. While applicant satisfaction with the process is high, remaining criticisms are highly specific, detailing issues with unnecessary administrative requirements, redundant guidance, and budget complexity, which suggests the simplified process is still embedded within an overly burdensome governance framework; moreover, the Programme must



Italy – Croatia

formally address the persistent need for stronger partner search support by implementing a stronger proactive tool or organized events. Secondly, the Programme needs to standardize and secure its data collection methods in future internal monitoring surveys by making questions on core performance metrics and essential feedback, such as the difficulty of the process, mandatory to prevent the loss of potentially useful data and ensure a complete, reliable dataset necessary for robust internal evaluation and targeted future improvements.

SSP and Standard Conclusions

To maximize the impact and efficiency of the next Call for Proposals, the Programme must strategically focus its improvements on three core areas: balancing national participation, simplifying the administrative ecosystem, and strategically leveraging social media for outreach..

A first strategic intervention is balancing the national profile of applicants, as survey data indicates a growing disparity with one country's representation becoming overwhelmingly dominant among newcomers. The Programme should develop a targeted outreach plan to boost engagement from underrepresented stakeholders, including regionally appropriate communication and the resolution of specific operational issues. This effort should be complemented by simplifying the administrative ecosystem and addressing the lingering administrative burden and documentation requirements. While the application submission is considered easy, suggestions from the 3rd Call for Proposals pointed to reducing the sheer amount of necessary documentation and simplifying the project budget component; to further lower barriers, especially for newcomers, the Programme must reduce these bureaucratic steps.

Finally, the Programme must maintain and strategically enhance its communication channels. The Programme Website and Infodays have retained their importance as the most effective information source and must be prioritized: the Website as the central, user-friendly hub for all call information, and Infodays by potentially expanding their frequency or capacity. The highly-valued positive aspects, such as the SCOs and the Relevance of Topics, must continue to be highlighted prominently. Concurrently, the communication strategy should be refined to capitalize on the increasing influence of social media, ensuring these channels serve as effective entry points that seamlessly direct applicants to the authoritative information on the Programme Website.



Chapter 3 Communication

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to assess the efficiency of communication activities implemented by the Interreg Italy-Croatia Programme 2021–2027 in reaching the identified target groups and contributing to the improvement of the knowledge on Programme funding opportunities in the area. In particular as set by the Programme Evaluation Plan, the internal evaluators investigated the Programme ability to communicate both to the potential beneficiaries and to the beneficiaries; they also analysed the contribution of the Programme in the publicizing interventions to the general public.

The Programme Communication strategy takes into account the IP, the Programme Brand Manual and the Project Implementation Manual.

The Programme Communication objectives are defined across the four management phases set in the IP:

1. **Drafting** – strengthen internal cooperation and communication capacity.
2. **Application** – attract relevant beneficiaries and raise awareness of Programme rules.
3. **Implementation** – support projects in delivering results and building thematic communities.
4. **Capitalisation** – increase visibility, ensure re-use of results, and engage a wider public.

The assessment evaluation activity aims at answering the following Evaluation Questions as defined in the Interreg Italy-Croatia Evaluation Plan 2021–2027 (version 2.0).:

- To what extent the communication strategy has contributed to improve the knowledge on EU funds and the CBC Programme objectives and opportunities in the cooperation area?
- Have the Programme communication measures reached the relevant target group efficiently?
- Has the Programme contributed to increase the capacity of projects to communicate their own achievements?

In accordance with Section III.5 of the Evaluation Plan, evaluation findings are intended to inform the MA and JS that will share and agree on the necessary follow-up actions to be undertaken at Programme level and guide improvements in future communication activities.

The assessment focused on three main domains:

- Communication to potential beneficiaries – awareness of Programme opportunities and rules;
- Communication to beneficiaries – support in project visibility and dissemination;
- Public communication – contribution to improving public knowledge on EU funds and cross-border cooperation.



Italy – Croatia

The analysis highlights strengths and bottlenecks, suggesting improvements. Communication activities are handled by MA and JS Communication officers, supported by an external agency (active since January 2025) for graphic production, event organization, and social media.

In alignment with the Evaluation Plan's principles (Section IV), the communication activities were assessed using a mixed-methods approach, combining desk research, statistical monitoring, and participatory tools, as per the Evaluation .

Data sources included:

- **Quantitative evidence:** analytics from the Programme website, social media insights, newsletter performance data, event participation rates;
- **Qualitative evidence:** focus group and semi-structured interviews with MA and JS Communication Officers, stakeholder interviews, project beneficiary survey response analysis, and document analysis of Programme Communication Strategy, Brand Manual, Operational Communication Plan

Indicators were structured following the **SMART principle** and derived from the monitoring framework established by the MA. Examples of indicators include:

- Number and reach of communication products and campaigns;
- Growth in website and social media engagement;
- Level of awareness and satisfaction among target groups;
- Evidence of project-level communication capacity and visibility in the cooperation area.

Monitoring of communication indicators followed a semi-annual frequency for outputs and annual for results, in line with the Operational Communication Plan's schedule.

3.2 Analysis of Communication Objectives

Between July and August 2025, the MA internal evaluation team conducted targeted single interviews and a focus group with the communication teams of the MA and the JS and with the Head of the MA to refine and validate the Programme communication objectives. The aim of these actions was to ensure that the Programme communication strategy is **clear, effective** and **aligned** with the Programme's overarching objectives.

In addition to the 4 objectives as defined in the IP, the collaboration between the Evaluation and the Communication units brought to identify further **nine complementary objectives**, including:

1. Attracting new potential beneficiaries,



Italy – Croatia

2. Increasing citizen awareness,
3. Strengthening youth engagement,
4. Strengthening the Project's impact,
5. Supporting synergies with other Interreg programmes,
6. Communicating the Programme's results effectively,
7. Supporting the Programme capitalisation process,
8. Prioritizing communication towards key decision-makers
9. Improving internal communication

Following the initial round of qualitative investigation, a follow-up survey was distributed to all participants of the focus groups and interviews to evaluate additional emergent aspects and further deepen the understanding of various issues identified during those sessions. The participants were asked to rate each of the communication objectives by their importance and extent of success.

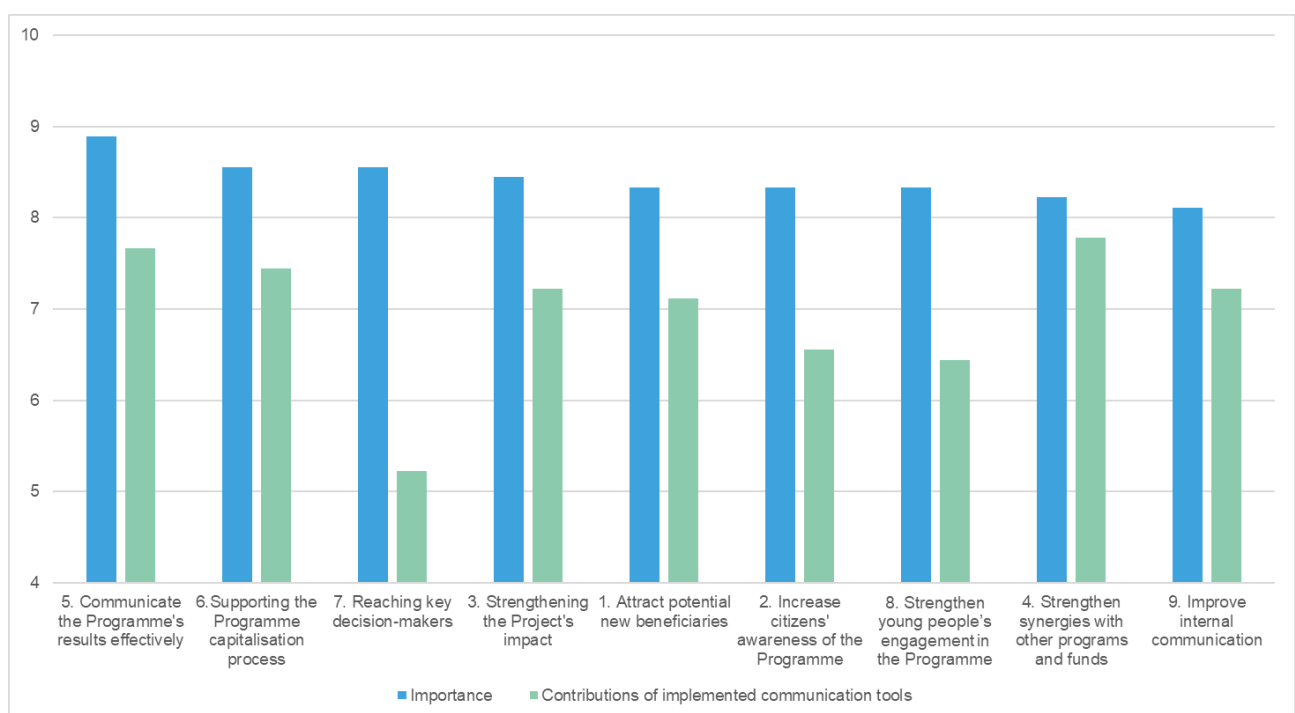


Figure 38: Average score of responses, ordered by importance, to the questions: 'How important do you consider the following communication objectives?' and 'To what extent the implemented communication activities/tools are contributing to each of the following objectives?'

This graph shows that overall, all objectives are considered highly important (mostly above 8 on the scale), while the contributions of communication tools are consistently lower, typically between 5 and 7. The largest gaps appear in “Reaching key decision-makers” and “Strengthening young people’s engagement”, indicating these are high-priority areas where current communication tools are



Italy – Croatia

underperforming. Conversely, “Communicating the Programme’s results effectively” and “Supporting the Programme capitalisation process” show relatively better alignment between importance and performance.

The objectives “Improve internal communication” and “Strengthen synergies with other programs and funds” are those that show the best alignment between importance and performance scoring a gap less than 1.

The data suggests that while stakeholders value all communication objectives highly, there is a clear need to enhance the effectiveness of existing tools, especially for reaching decision-makers and engaging young people.

1) Attracting new potential beneficiaries

Objective description and score analysis:

To attract new beneficiaries, the Programme must promote its funding opportunities and highlight the tangible benefits of participation. While its visibility has improved, further efforts are needed to engage new partners, especially SMEs. Survey participants rated this objective as highly important (8.3/10), but the contribution of current communication activities scored lower (7.1/10).

Strengths:

The Programme has a comprehensive communication infrastructure, including the website, social media, newsletter, emails, and events. Communication is audience-tailored, core messages are clear (“the Programme is useful” and “the Programme does this”), and events serve as key engagement and visibility tools.

Areas for improvement:

Current activities only moderately reach new audiences. Future efforts should include targeted digital campaigns, authentic user-generated content, localized events, partnerships with NGOs and schools, webinars, and dedicated social media groups to broaden and deepen engagement.

2) Increasing citizen awareness of the Programme's activities

Objective description and score analysis:

The goal is to make citizens aware of Programme activities and their shared cross-border benefits. This objective is highly important (8.3/10), but current communication effectiveness is lower (6.6/10).

Strengths:

The Programme effectively uses its website, social media, newsletter, events, and collaborates with external professionals. Communication is adapted by audience type, and innovative channels are being explored.

Areas for improvement:



Italy – Croatia

The communication style should be simplified and fully translated into Italian and Croatian. Digital engagement should include YouTube, podcasts, quizzes, and short video explainers. Community involvement, competitions, and enhanced participation of beneficiaries as advocates are recommended, alongside younger staff for more dynamic content.

3) Strengthening the Project's impact

Objective description and score analysis:

The aim is to help beneficiaries communicate their results effectively, showcasing project impact. Survey importance was 8.4/10, with communication activities rated 7.2/10.

Strengths:

Robust support is already in place through all channels, dashboards, events, trainings, webinars, and engagement with EU initiatives. Monthly COM-MEET UPs strengthen community cohesion. Core messages are clear, and project synergies are well-supported and provides substantial beneficiary support.

Areas for improvement:

Activities should move from basic dissemination to maximizing long-term impact. Recommendations include professionalizing project communications, allocating budget for communication outputs, leveraging high-impact digital channels, strengthening local engagement, and expanding skills-building for beneficiaries

4) Strengthening synergies with other programmes and funds

Objective description and score analysis:

This objective focuses on building links with EUSAIR and other funds in particular in the field of maritime cooperation capitalising on the results of past work. This strategic approach is key to maximize efficiency and avoid duplication. Importance scored 8.2/10; communication effectiveness 7.8/10.

Strengths:

A comprehensive strategy exists, leveraging all channels, cross-programme initiatives, collaboration with projects, and active event participation particularly those revolving around MMM. The existing framework includes cross-programme initiatives, coordination with other Interreg entities (such as Interreg Italy–Slovenia), and consistent communication through established networks

Areas for improvement:

Joint Calls and coordinated actions with additional programmes and funds are needed. Communication should better highlight multi-programme results via dashboards, social media, and



Italy – Croatia

inter-programme networks to amplify synergies. Achieving this requires focused work at the decision-making level to enhance collaboration among various funds.

5) Communicating the Programme's results effectively**Objective description and score analysis:**

Communicating results is key to transparency, trust, and showcasing impact. The Programme needs to better demonstrate its progress toward its objectives and highlight the milestones it has already reached ensuring that stakeholders and the public are fully aware of its accomplishments. Importance scored 8.9/10; contribution of communication activities 7.7/10

Strengths:

The Programme is currently performing well in communicating its results and has built a strong operational foundation. The Programme uses all channels, events, EU-level initiatives, and clear core messages to communicate results effectively.

Areas for improvement:

Communication should be simplified and fully localized, with more accessible, segmented messaging. Digital channels, advertising, media relations, and engagement with local administrations and communities should be expanded, along with educational and interactive outreach.

6) Supporting the Programme capitalisation process**Objective description and score analysis:**

Communication supports and integrates the Programme capitalisation process by raising awareness & visibility of the achievements and strengthening the re-use of results, and ultimately enhancing the realization of transferable outputs to boost their wider application and impact. Importance scored 8.6/10; communication contribution 7.4/10.

Strengths:

Existing structures include core communication tools, the MMM, dashboards, mini-sites, and monthly COM-MEET UPs. Collaboration with projects is strong, and messages are clear.

Areas for improvement:

Focus should shift from gathering results to ensuring quality, accessibility, and reuse. Structured knowledge-sharing platforms, multi-programme events, workshops, thematic reports, and multimedia content are recommended for broader dissemination and policy relevance.



Italy – Croatia

7) Prioritizing communication towards key decision-makers**Objective description and score analysis:**

The aim is to raise the Programme's profile with policymakers locally and in Brussels. Importance scored 8.6/10; current communication effectiveness is low at 5.2/10. Despite this high importance, the Programme's efforts to reach key decision-makers currently rely on tailored communication, high-level meetings, ministerial forums, and networking events.

Strengths:

Communication recognizes audience differences (youth, citizens, decision-makers, Brussels, press, beneficiaries) as key to developing targeted strategies and leverages events as key engagement platforms.

Areas for improvement:

Strategy must shift to structured, policy-aligned outreach. Tools include dedicated newsletters, policy briefs, concise infographics, roundtables, and workshops. Decision-makers should be invited to events, and trusted partners should support evidence-based advocacy.

8) Strengthen young people's engagement in the Programme**Objective description and score analysis:**

The goal is to engage youth using modern, accessible channels. Importance scored 8.3/10; communication effectiveness 6.4/10.

Strengths:

IVY, social media, and youth events provide a solid foundation. Communication is audience-specific and open to innovative channels

Areas for improvement:

Strategy should prioritize youth-for-youth content, professional engagement opportunities, school and university collaborations, mentoring, youth policy forums, younger staff for digital content, and streamlined administrative procedures.

9) Improving internal communication**Objective description and score analysis:**

Internal communication across the Interreg Italy-Croatia structure - Monitoring Committee, national delegations, MA, and JS - ensures coordination and efficiency across the Programme. It reduces misunderstandings, streamline processes, and support more informed, efficient decision-making aligned with the Programme's strategic goals. Importance scored 8.1/10; effectiveness 7.2/10.

Strength:

Italy – Croatia

Established tools include meetings, emails, shared folders, collaboration platforms, and targeted documentation.

Areas for improvement:

Promote transparent communication, increase cross-team exchanges, implement digital chat platforms, reorganize repositories, establish feedback mechanisms, conduct communication workshops, organize team-building activities, and appoint a dedicated internal communication manager.

The comprehensive analysis conducted across our core objectives reveals that while the Programme's goals are highly important, the contribution of current communication activities often falls short of meeting these high expectations.

To maximize the effectiveness of future communication, the Programme must implement a strategic shift by conducting specific, detailed analysis for every objective across three key pillars:

1. Channel: determining the optimal platform (e.g., social media, specialized events, mass media) based on audience consumption habits.
2. Content: defining the most relevant narrative style and format (e.g., simplified stories, policy briefs, interactive video) required to engage each target group.
3. Target Groups: establishing highly specific audience segmentation to ensure messages are relevant and delivered efficiently.

The core challenge moving forward is not *what* the Programme should communicate, but determining to whom, with what message, and through which channels to ensure measurable success and resource efficiency.

In the meantime, a Strategic Roadmap with Targets, Content, and Channels (presented below) was developed based on available data.



Italy – Croatia

Objective Focus	Primary Target Group(s)	Core Content Strategy	Key Channel Pivot
1. Attracting new potential beneficiaries	SMEs, new partners in priority sectors.	Focus on tangible success stories, funding opportunity highlights, and simplified application steps. Avoid technical complexity.	Enhanced digital targeting (granular analysis/segmentation) combined with localized outreach (community events, local NGOs).
2. Increasing citizen awareness	General public, local communities.	Simplify language drastically; use accessible, laid-back content emphasizing real-life impact on communities and shared cross-border benefits.	Prioritize full Italian/Croatian translation; use mass media (TV, radio, digital installations) and active social media (YouTube, podcasts).
3. Strengthening the Project's impact	Project communication managers, local press.	Mandate high-quality, reportable outputs (e.g., specific number of videos/events). Focus on results that are transferable and inform policy.	Dedicated capacity-building workshops for beneficiaries and stronger promotion through EU-level initiatives (RegioStars, Interact).
4. Strengthening synergies	Programme management, other European/National Funds.	Formal agreements on joint actions/calls. Focus external communication on shared successes and collective, multi-programme impact.	Development of interactive dashboards and strong social media to communicate cross-programme partnerships externally.
5. Communicating results effectively	Citizens, stakeholders, press.	Shift from statistics to personalized, engaging storytelling (videos, infographics, individual testimonials) to showcase concrete impact and justify public funds.	Dedicated media relations investment (press lists, releases), targeted content segmentation, and community/educational outreach (schools, libraries).
6. Supporting the Programme capitalisation process	Policy analysts, researcher project teams.	Structured knowledge sharing based on cross-checked, effective	Implement cross-checks for output quality; create formal knowledge-sharing



Objective Focus	Primary Target Group(s)	Core Content Strategy	Key Channel Pivot
		outputs. Develop thematic reports and policy briefs from project outcomes.	repositories and open data platforms; multi-programme events.
7. Prioritizing communication towards key decision-makers	Local councillors, Ministeri staff, Brussels officials.	Concise, evidence-based policy briefs and infographics delivered in the national language; preview of unpublished news to build relationships.	Establish periodic, dedicated newsletters/briefs; use professional facilitators; provide translated, targeted materials (e.g., Italian for councillors).
8. Strengthen young people's engagement	Students, young professionals, youth organizations.	Content that is youth-for-youth, focusing on professional relevance (job opportunities, skill development) over pure volunteering.	Prioritize Instagram/Reels; engage influencers; focus on professional opportunities (e.g., junior employment) and sponsoring relevant cultural events.
9. Improving internal communication	MA, JS, Monitoring Committee, National Delegations.	Focus on transparency and mutual understanding of tasks. Systematize feedback mechanisms and share clear information on activities and assignments.	Introduce digital platforms for real-time chat and internal repository reorganization; focus on team-building activities and dedicated internal communication roles.

Figure 39: Strategic Communication Roadmap outlining the specific Target Groups, Core Content Strategy, and Key Channel Pivots

3.4 Communication, Information and Visibility Initiatives

The Interreg Italy–Croatia Programme implemented an integrated set of communication and visibility activities aimed at improving stakeholder engagement, increasing awareness of EU cross-border opportunities, and supporting beneficiaries in disseminating their project achievements. These activities were strategically aligned with the Programme's Communication Strategy and contributed directly to its overarching objectives: strengthening participation, transparency, and the long-term visibility of results across the cooperation area.

Key activities performed in 2024 and up to June 2025 included:



Italy – Croatia

- Content production and publication:

Continuous publication of web content and social media posts (Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube), regular newsletters, and the production of thematic leaflets and stories ensured consistent outreach and audience engagement. The Programme website served as the primary information hub, registering stable user growth and repeated peaks of activity during major calls and events. Social media channels, particularly LinkedIn, demonstrated a significant increase in followers and interaction rates, confirming their effectiveness for engaging both professional and institutional audiences.

- Events and stakeholder engagement:

A total of 12 institutional and project events were organised, including 4 Info Days for the 3rd Call for Proposals, stakeholder dialogues, thematic workshops, and international forums. These events acted as catalysts for cross-border networking and knowledge exchange, enabling potential and current beneficiaries to gain a better understanding of Programme rules, funding opportunities, and communication expectations. Participant feedback indicated high satisfaction levels, particularly regarding the quality of information, practical guidance, and opportunities for partnership building.

- Programme promotion and advertising:

The Programme launched a wide range of promotional materials, videos, and infographics, complemented by a multi-channel campaign supporting the 3rd Call. This campaign successfully enhanced visibility and awareness across digital and traditional media, resulting in a substantial increase in web traffic and social media reach during the campaign period. The use of dynamic and visually engaging formats, such as short videos and storytelling posts, further strengthened the Programme's online presence and connection with wider audiences.

- Beneficiary support and capacity building:

Through COM-MEETUPS, networking activities, and tailored guidance, the Programme reinforced the communication capacities of project partners and promoted the exchange of good practices among beneficiaries. These initiatives fostered a more coherent communication approach across projects, strengthened cross-sectoral collaboration, and contributed to the Programme's capitalisation objectives by improving the visibility and reuse of project results.

The table below provides an overview of the main communication activities implemented by the Programme during 2024–2025, organised by typology of target audience. This approach highlights



Italy – Croatia

how the Programme's communication efforts were strategically diversified to address the specific needs and characteristics of different stakeholder groups.

Each activity is linked to one or more of the nine strategic communication objectives defined in the Programme's Communication Strategy: attracting new potential beneficiaries, increasing citizen awareness, strengthening youth engagement, strengthening the project's impact, supporting synergies with other Interreg programmes, communicating the Programme's results effectively, supporting the Programme capitalisation process, prioritising communication towards key decision-makers, and improving internal communication.

This classification demonstrates the Programme's targeted and multi-level communication approach, balancing visibility and engagement across audiences ranging from institutional stakeholders and project beneficiaries to citizens and youth. Activities such as Info Days, thematic campaigns, and social media outreach were primarily aimed at potential beneficiaries and the general public, while events like COM-MEETUPs and the Mediterranean Multi-Programme Mechanism served as key instruments for knowledge exchange and cooperation among beneficiaries, institutions, and other Interreg programmes.

Overall, the distribution of activities reflects a progressive evolution towards more audience-tailored and impact-oriented communication, ensuring both greater visibility of results and stronger stakeholder participation in the Programme's implementation and capitalisation processes.



Italy – Croatia

Target Audience	Main Activities Implemented	Related Communication Objectives
<u>Potential Beneficiaries</u>	• Official Programme Website (https://www.italy-croatia.eu) • Infodays promoting the 3rd Call for Proposals (Italy & Croatia, May 2025) • Thematic Communication Campaign for the 3rd Call (May–June 2025) • Social Media management (Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube) • Distribution of periodic Newsletters • Promotional materials (leaflets, infographics, videos) • Institutional Video (EN + IT/HR subtitles) • Participation in EUSAIR Forum (May 2024)	• Attracting new potential beneficiaries • Strengthening the Project's impact • Communicating the Programme's results effectively
<u>Project Beneficiaries (Lead & Partners)</u>	• COM-MEETUPS and networking workshops • Institutional & Project-Related Events (Infodays, LP webinars, OSI sessions) • Official Programme Website and Newsletter updates • Social Media promotion of project results • Mediterranean Multi-Programme Mechanism Event in Split (June 2025) • Project promotion on Programme social media	• Strengthening the Project's impact • Supporting the Programme capitalisation process • Communicating the Programme's results effectively • Improving internal communication
<u>Institutions & Programme Bodies (MA, JS, NAs, etc.)</u>	• Institutional & Project-Related Events • Stakeholder Dialogue Conference (Italy–Croatia, August 2024) • Participation in EUSAIR Forum (May 2024) • Mediterranean Multi-Programme Mechanism Event (June 2025) • Coordination via internal channels and COM-MEETUPS	• Supporting synergies with other Interreg programmes • Prioritising communication towards key decision-makers • Improving internal communication



Italy – Croatia

Target Audience	Main Activities Implemented	Related Communication Objectives
<u>Youth (13–30 years)</u>	• Workshops and networking sessions (Venice Film Festival, Ecomondo Fair, 2024) • Public outreach at Venice Boat Show (May–June 2024) • Social Media campaigns and storytelling formats • Inclusion of youth in project communication activities	• Strengthening youth engagement • Increasing citizen awareness • Communicating the Programme's results effectively
<u>General Public</u>	• Official Website and Social Media channels • Public outreach events (Venice Boat Show, Split Event 2025) • Institutional Video and thematic campaigns • Media relations and storytelling on achievements	• Increasing citizen awareness • Communicating the Programme's results effectively • Strengthening the Project's impact
<u>Media & Communication Stakeholders</u>	• Press and social media promotion of project stories • Distribution of visual and editorial materials • Organisation of high-visibility public events (Boat Show, Stakeholder Dialogues, EUSAIR Forum) • Collaboration with EU Info Centres and Interreg networks	• Communicating the Programme's results effectively • Supporting the Programme capitalisation process • Prioritising communication towards key decision-makers
<u>Other Interreg Programmes & EU Institutions</u>	• Participation in Mediterranean Multi-Programme Mechanism (Split, 2025) • Coordination at EUSAIR Forum and through shared communication initiatives • Exchange of best practices and harmonised branding	• Supporting synergies with other Interreg programmes • Supporting the Programme capitalisation process • Communicating the Programme's results effectively

Figure 40: Ongoing initiatives by Target audience, Main activities implemented and Related communication objectives



Italy – Croatia

Overall, the Programme's 2024–2025 communication activities demonstrated measurable progress towards more structured, inclusive, and impactful communication. Digital channels continued to expand their reach and engagement levels, events consolidated the Programme's visibility in key thematic areas, and targeted beneficiary support initiatives helped build a stronger community of practice among project partners. Together, these elements reflect a more mature and performance-driven communication system, capable of supporting both the Programme's strategic goals and its contribution to the wider Interreg community.

3.5 Performance analysis

Communication has been continuous since the start of the programming cycle, with increased intensity during key events and campaign periods (e.g. the launch of the calls). Key messages communicated were mostly funding opportunities with the launch of the calls and achievements and results of funded projects.

Between April 2024 and March 2025, the website recorded **about 58,600 users**, with traffic remaining stable overall. Two peaks were observed in late June and mid-September 2024. In total, the site reached **around 457,000 page views** and **83,000 unique pages viewed**.

During the 1st 2025 semester, both social media channels grew significantly, with peak activity in May and June around the launch of the 3rd call and the communication campaign. Facebook followers increased by 24% (900 to 1,119), boosted by a paid campaign from May to June that drove views from 4,200 to over 1.2 million and page reach to 490,000. Interactions also rose sharply, surpassing 600 in June. LinkedIn showed even stronger growth (+64%, from 607 to 995 followers), with consistently higher engagement than Facebook, confirming its role as the most dynamic channel for expanding the project's professional community and strengthening institutional visibility.

A satisfaction questionnaire was distributed to participants of the four Info Days held in May 2025 in Šibenik, Rijeka, Ravenna, and Brindisi to present the 3rd call for proposals. Out of around 300 invitations, 92 responses were collected, equally from Italy and Croatia, with a mix of newcomers, young participants, and representatives from higher education and training centers. The Questionnaire results show very high overall satisfaction (average >4.4/5), especially regarding the applicability of knowledge, quality of materials, and event organization. Locations and technical arrangements were also highly rated. Networking and Q&A sessions were valued most, with strong interest in future topics such as partner search, project examples, financial aspects, and proposal drafting. Most respondents had prior experience with Interreg calls. The IT-HR Program website and personal invitations proved to be the most effective communication channels, supported by social media and newsletters.



Italy – Croatia

ACTION / TOOL	OUTPUT INDICATOR	2024	2025 (up to 30/06/2025)
Events, Seminars, Workshops and Webinars	No. of events, seminars, workshops and webinars	26	19
Web	No. of news web pages published on the Programme website	847	527
Social Media	No. of messages sent on different social channels (FB posts + Tweets + IG posts + Stories)	251	176 + 8 ads
Informational, Editorial and Promotional Materials	No. of products created (leaflets, brochures, publications...)	7	2
Audio-Video and Multimedia Products	No. of videos created, motion graphics produced	28	22
Communication campaigns	No. of communications	0	1
Press campaigns	No. Inserts and advertorials in newspapers and periodicals	0	0

Figure 41: Performance analysis by actions and output indicators, 01/01/2024-30/06/2025

Audience, Content and Interactions - 2024 and 2025

CATEGORY	CHANNEL / INDICATOR	2024 TOTAL	2025 (30 June 2025)
Audience	Twitter/X Followers	415	N.a
Audience	Facebook Followers	174	1119



Italy – Croatia

CATEGORY	CHANNEL / INDICATOR	2024 TOTAL	2025 (30 June 2025)
Audience	LinkedIn Followers/Connections	524	955
Audience	YouTube Followers	175	151
Audience	Digital Newsletter Subscribers	5123	5081
Audience	Unique Visitors to Programme Website	32055	8786
Content	No. of Tweets	35	N.a
Content	No. of Facebook Posts	134	100
Content	No. of LinkedIn Posts		89
Content	No. of YouTube Videos	23	25
Content	No. of Newsletters Sent	23530	11154
Content	No. of contents Published on Website	847	527
Interactions	YouTube Views	3153	2178
Interactions	YouTube Likes	2	7
Interactions	Facebook Post Views	15208	1.606.644
Interactions	Facebook Post Likes + Comments	n.a	1346 + 21
Interactions	LinkedIn Post Views	n.a	940
Interactions	LinkedIn Post Likes + Comments	n.a	1848 + 14
Interactions	Digital Newsletter Views/Opens	n.a	9343



Italy – Croatia

CATEGORY	CHANNEL / INDICATOR	2024 TOTAL	2025 (30 June 2025)
Interactions	Website Downloads	133	
Interactions	Total		

Figure 42: Performance analysis by Category, Channel and Indicators, 01/01/2024-30/06/2025

3.6 Efficiency Analysis

According to the Evaluation analysis, the Interreg Italy–Croatia communication is aligned with the Programme’s overarching objectives. Among the strengths of the Programme’s communication, its internal communication with projects, which includes regular support provided to Project Communication Managers during monthly COM Meetups and to Website Administrators through monthly Help Desk sessions. Project promotion - both on social media and through events - is also acknowledged as positive, based on feedback surveys collected.

In its external communication, the Interreg Italy–Croatia Programme has strengthened its presence on social media by increasing the amount of content published and ensuring both regularity and visual consistency. The website follows an informative approach in news writing and is kept regularly updated. In terms of tone, the Interreg Italy–Croatia Programme has begun addressing its audience with a more familiar “we,” rather than the impersonal third-person “the Programme,” while consistently maintaining the use of the key words “Interreg Italy–Croatia” to reinforce visibility and identity. This approach combines a mix of formal and informal narrative.

In terms of target reach, institutional and project-based stakeholders were reached effectively though engagement with citizens and youth remain weaker.

Channel efficiency: The website ensured stable organic visibility, while LinkedIn emerged as the most dynamic and engaging platform. Visual storytelling formats showed the strongest potential for public outreach.

At the same time, important areas for improvement remain. Communication should become more dynamic and youth-oriented, which requires both fresh staff skills and greater investment in contemporary digital formats, such as podcasting, reels, use of Youtube as social media and not just video-repository. The opening of the Instagram channel in July 2025 is expected to boost the Programme’s capacity to reach different target audiences such as the general public and youth. Introducing SEO-oriented writing, as recommended by the SEO analysis carried out by Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini/by the external Communication Provider hired by the Programme, is also essential



Italy – Croatia

to improve online discoverability and reach. Engagement with local administrations and decision-makers needs to be more structured and linguistically accessible in order to overcome barriers to dialogue and ensure a stronger policy impact. The evaluation also highlights the persistent challenge of heavy administrative procedures, which often limit the time available for strategic communication activities. Streamlining internal processes would enable the Programme to focus more on delivering impactful, outward-facing messages.

Findings and Recommendations

The findings from this evaluation process show that the Programme benefits from several communication strengths. These include the willingness to experiment with new formats such as podcasts and reels, the establishment of **COM-MEET UPs** as a support mechanism for beneficiaries, strong collaboration with projects and the use of events as highly visible and engaging communication tools. The Programme has also embraced a more strategic approach to tailoring messages for different audiences, recognising that communication with citizens, youth, decision-makers, and project partners requires differentiated formats and language. At the same time, important areas for improvement remain. Communication must become more dynamic and youth-oriented, requiring both fresh staff skills and greater investment in contemporary digital formats. Engagement with local administrations and decision-makers needs to be more structured and linguistically accessible, in order to overcome barriers to dialogue and ensure a stronger policy impact. The evaluation also highlights the persistent challenge of heavy administrative procedures, which often limit the time available for strategic communication activities. Streamlining internal processes would allow the Programme to concentrate more on delivering impactful, outward-facing messages.

The Programme successfully ensured visibility and participation among institutional and beneficiary groups. Communication activities effectively supported project implementation and knowledge sharing. Public engagement remains an area for improvement, particularly with younger audiences and citizens at large.

Main recommendations for improvements are:

- **Increase communication segmentation** to better address the needs of different target groups.
- **Invest in storytelling and visual content** to increase interest and understanding among the general public.
- Strengthen **structured engagement with decision-makers** and local administrations



Overall Conclusions

The Second Operational Evaluation of the Interreg Italy–Croatia Programme 2021–2027 confirms a clear trajectory of improvement in operational performance, administrative efficiency, inclusiveness, and communication effectiveness compared to the first internal evaluation cycle. The corrective measures introduced in the Third Call for proposal after the initial assessment have yielded positive and measurable results, strengthening both the quality and accessibility of Programme implementation.

The Programme demonstrates strong operational capacity and sound financial management. By mid-2025, the achievement of the N+3 target ahead of schedule and the high absorption rates of available resources - particularly within Small-Scale Projects (97.8%) - reflect robust implementation mechanisms and an increasingly efficient management system.

At the same time, the continued oversubscription of Calls for Proposals, with requests exceeding available resources by up to 700%, underscores both the Programme's strategic relevance and the sustained demand for cross-border cooperation initiatives in the Adriatic area. This demand also reveals a need for further optimization of resource allocation among Specific Objectives to ensure balanced thematic coverage and equitable territorial impact.

The simplification measures introduced after the first evaluation have significantly improved user experience and administrative efficiency. Survey results demonstrate a marked increase in applicant satisfaction with the application and submission process, rising from 55% during the first Call to over 90% in the third.

Enhancements such as the single "Application Package," improved JEMS functionalities, video tutorials, and clearer guidance documentation have contributed to this positive outcome. Remaining difficulties are now limited to a small number of specific procedural or structural issues, which should be addressed through further digitalization and harmonization of reporting and reimbursement procedures. The continued application of Simplified Cost Options has also proven effective in reducing administrative burden and ensuring transparent financial management.

The Programme has achieved tangible progress in broadening its beneficiary base. The number of newcomers has increased significantly across all project typologies, with over two-thirds of participants in the latest Small-Scale Projects and nearly 40% in Standard Projects representing first-time beneficiaries.

A particularly notable trend is the growing participation of private and third-sector actors, whose share of total beneficiaries has risen steadily, thereby diversifying partnerships and enhancing innovation potential. While Italian entities continue to represent a larger share of applicants, the involvement of Croatian partners remains strong and strategically significant. Future calls should continue promoting geographical and institutional balance, with targeted outreach to underrepresented territories and sectors.

The evaluation confirms that the measures implemented following the first Operational Evaluation — such as streamlined application forms, simplified eligibility checks, enhanced guidance, and



Italy – Croatia

reinforced communication — have effectively addressed previous bottlenecks. The introduction of clearer intervention logics, specific youth-targeting measures, and incentives for newcomer participation have further improved the Programme's inclusiveness and thematic coverage.

Nevertheless, some challenges persist, particularly in ensuring timely financial execution for larger projects and in maintaining consistency between project-level and Programme-level indicators. Continued monitoring and periodic refinement of guidance and support tools will therefore remain essential to sustaining the achieved improvements.

Communication activities have evolved considerably, transitioning from a primarily informative approach toward a more integrated and data-driven strategy. The Programme Website remains the primary source of information for applicants, complemented by Info Days, newsletters, and social media outreach. The increasing use of social media as an entry point to Programme information demonstrates a gradual shift toward more interactive and accessible communication practices.

However, further efforts are required to move beyond dissemination toward strategic communication and capitalization. Greater emphasis on targeted messaging, storytelling, and cross-programme synergies will enhance visibility, support policy influence, and promote the long-term sustainability of results.

The findings of this evaluation point to three overarching priorities for the continuation of the programming period:

- Consolidate simplification and efficiency through continuous improvement of digital tools, reporting mechanisms, and administrative procedures.
- Ensure balanced participation and funding across territories, sectors, and project typologies to foster equitable and sustainable cross-border cooperation.
- Strengthen communication and capitalization by promoting evidence-based outreach, effective result dissemination, and the integration of Programme achievements into broader European cooperation frameworks.

