



Съфинансирано от
Европейския съюз



ПРОГРАМА
ТЕХНИЧЕСКА ПОМОЩ

SUMMARY

OF

REPORT ON THE EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS, EFFICIENCY, AND IMPACT OF THE NETWORK OF 27 REGIONAL INFORMATION CENTERS IN BULGARIA

Summary

Scope and Objective:

The evaluation of the network of 27 Regional Information Centres (RICs) in Bulgaria¹, covers the period **December 2015 - November 2024**.

The objective of the evaluation is to examine the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of investments in the Network of 27 RICs, implemented through three direct awards of grant aid under the OP "Good Governance" 2014-2020 and one under the "Technical Assistance" Programme (TAP) 2021-2027. The evaluation provides stakeholders with recommendations for improvements in the work of the RICs, including elaboration of a concept for the development of the RIC network and update of the [Procedural Manual](#) for its work. It is structured in 12 evaluation questions as follows: effectiveness (5 questions), efficiency (5 questions) and impact (2 questions).

Methodology:

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the evaluation, to collect primary and secondary data, such as: desk research of documents, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, the "mystery shopper" method, as well as on-site visits.

72 RIC employees (82% of all employees) and 579 service users (administrations, civil society and citizens, business, academia, etc.) participated in the **two online surveys conducted with RIC representatives and users of their services**. 67 **interviews** were conducted with representatives of various stakeholders: the Contracting Authority, experts in the Managing Authorities (MA) of the programs funded under the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)/EU Shared Management Funds, the Central Coordination Unit (CCU); RICs representatives, representatives of the municipal administrations, beneficiaries of the projects and RIC hosts, as well as users of the RICs services. **Four focus groups** were conducted – two with RIC representatives and two with users of RIC services. A **"mystery shopper" research** was conducted through three channels – on-site visits, telephone calls and e-mail. **On-site visits** were also conducted to 14 RICs and the relevant municipal administrations hosting the RICs, to collect first-hand information on the functioning of the centres.

The analyses were carried out using a combination of methods, depending on the nature of the evaluation questions, such as: stakeholder analysis, indicator analysis, descriptive statistics, comparative evaluation, as well as logic models and case studies.

¹ The assessment was carried out by ECOSTYLE CLOC (Company under the Law on Obligations and Contracts) under Contract No. MC-79/22.07.2024 with the Administration of the Council of Ministers in the period August 2024-January 2025.

Methodological and other constraints:

Both available data and data collected during the evaluation were used for the analyses. Due to the lack of systematized data on RIC service users and their satisfaction with the services provided, the analyses of RIC effectiveness have been based on the views of key stakeholders such as the MA, the CCU, municipalities, service users, as well as the RICs self-assessment.

The information obtained on the opinion of the RICs and the stakeholders is not proportional due to their different participation in the consultations. In the questionnaire among RIC service users, territorial disparities are observed: 40% of the respondents are from four regions (Blagoevgrad, Dobrich, Burgas, Varna). The observed territorial disparity is a direct consequence of the different number of service users provided by the RICs included in the survey.

The RIC functions under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, including their role as “one-stop-shop” service providers on energy efficiency and the RICs support for other funds and programmes directly management by the EC, do not fall within the scope of the evaluation, and are therefore indirectly assessed.

Conclusions on the evaluation criteria:

Effectiveness

The RICs network successfully disseminates information on (ESIF)/EU Shared Management Funds funding opportunities, but the centres rarely create their own content, which reduces the effectiveness of the communication to the target groups. The network’s Procedural Manual does not explicitly require the centres to promote achieved results, and therefore their contribution in this area is smaller and mainly consists of supporting MA initiatives.

Sustainable partnerships of RICs with business, administration and civil society have been built, but weak activities with academia and cultural institutions are observed. Cooperation with other information centres, and in particular with EU info-points, is diverse – while some RICs report successful partnerships, other RICs note they do not cooperate with such centres but rather compete with them.

The effectiveness of RICs varies from centre to centre. Although objective factors such as the number and size of municipalities covered by the RICs and the existence of potential candidates for funding under the open procedures co-funded by European funds, also contribute to the differences, these are not the only reasons for the variations in the performance and results achieved by the RICs. The motivation, the quality of RIC work and the support received from the municipalities are also of significant importance.

The survey among RIC service users indicates that satisfaction with RICs’ services is high, RICs being a preferred source of information on opportunities for European funding. At the same time, since there is no requirement in the RICs Procedural Manual, the RICs do not measure user

satisfaction with their services and thus miss opportunities to obtain feedback that can be used to improve their work.

Efficiency

Reduction of administrative burden over the years, related to the standardisation of the application and implementation reporting process through the introduction of simplified cost options under the procedures for RIC network funding (funding with uniform rate eligible expenditures other than personnel costs), have increased RICs efficiency.

RICs funding through grant aid contracts with specific municipalities creates difficulties related to differences in remuneration of experts in different municipalities, as well as challenges in ensuring timely provision of necessary materials, equipment and travel authorisations, which leads to hindrances in the work of some centres and staff turnover. In addition to the municipalities, the CCU and the TAP MA are also involved in RICs management, which complicates the processes related to providing optimal working conditions and monitoring of their work and leads to blurring of responsibility.

For better monitoring on behalf of the CCU and evaluation of RICs performance, it is necessary to expand the requirements in the Procedure Manual of the RIC network for providing information with which their activities can be monitored. To increase the effectiveness and quality of their work, it is advisable for the centres to maintain registers with contacts of users and potential users of their services, which is currently done partially and on a voluntary basis, as it is not required in the minimal selection of actions/ obligations outlined in the Procedure Manual for the operation of the network.

Communication methods are traditional (like sharing information on social media, development of information materials, and organization of events), but the staff is willing to expand them through the introduction of interactive approaches and the use of new technologies (like online events and making videos). The CCU could contribute to and stimulate this process by an annual assessment of the needs and by providing appropriate guidance and practical training.

Overall, RIC employees have a good capacity that needs continuous upgrades and development. At the time of the evaluation, a lack of regular training, including for newly recruited staff members has been noted. Meetings between the RICs, CCU and MA since the COVID-19 pandemic, are rare, which hinders the quality information exchange.

The consultations with various stakeholders indicate that there is identified need for improving the visibility of the network as a whole.

Impact

RICs contribute significantly to informing ESIF/EU Shared Management Funds potential beneficiaries, improving their knowledge and skills, reducing application difficulties and increasing accessibility.

The centres play a key role in the implementation of Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) in Bulgaria in the 2021-2027 programming period, because in addition to providing information, the RIC employees are part of the expert staff of the Regional Development Councils², and as mediators, they contribute to the creation of partnerships.

The role of RICs in promoting the measures of the Just Transition Fund is rather limited, as evident from the questionnaire among RIC service users (Annex 5). From the Strategic Agricultural Plan (2023–2027), RICs cover only the measures under Community-Led Local Development, which reduces their impact on stimulating interest and participation in the other measures of the plan.

RICs have added value for local communities as a “one-stop-shop” service providers in relation to energy efficiency and support in the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. However, these activities have not been evaluated in detail, as they are beyond the scope of the evaluation.

The OPGG/TAP is the main source of funding for the RIC Network. According to UMIS data, the share of ESIF/ European shared management funds in the RIC funding is more than 95%, and for most RICs reaches 98-99% of their total expenditure. Without this funding, the observed positive effects would not have been possible.

Recommendations:

The report makes recommendations for improving and standardising RIC Network activities, including elaboration of a concept for development of the network and for amendments to the Procedure Manual for the functioning of the network. The main recommendations are:

Recommendations to the CCU:

The CCU is to supplement the Procedure Manual for the functioning of the network with:

- Requirements for RICs to promote the results achieved under the programs co-funded by EU funds. This will increase the visibility of the benefits of the projects for local communities. Such activity shall be included in the Procedure Manual by clearly describing the necessary activities, obligations, responsible persons, and timeline for implementation.
- Requirements for RICs to supply CCU with information on: the number of participants in on-site events; number of participants in online events; number of telephone consultations; number of on-site consultations; number of e-mail consultations; user satisfaction, as well as a profile of participants by target groups (such as business, non-governmental sector, citizens, academic institutions, administrations, municipalities, etc.).

² Under art. 18 of the Regional Development Act

- Requirement for RICs to maintain registers with contacts of current users and potential users of their services.
- Supplement and detailing of the minimum standards for RIC performance, including the scope and quality of services; target groups; and aligning standards for collecting information from users.
- Creating conditions for proactive and targeted outreach to new target groups and expansion of the partner network.

The CCU shall identify the needs to upgrade the existing capacity of the network staff and shall take appropriate measures such as providing training.

The CCU shall resume and plan regular meetings between the RICs and the CCU, as well as between the RICs and the MA of the Partnership agreement programs.

The CCU shall research the current needs and gaps in terms of the overall vision and branding of the network and shall update the existing [Branding and Vision Concept of the 27 RICs network](#). In addition, The CCU shall consider the possibility of conducting a national campaign to promote network activities.

Recommendations to the RICs:

To improve the effectiveness of communication activities, it is recommended that RIC experts create their own, or adapted texts according to the regional specificities, needs, and interests of the target groups in an understandable language, instead of the current practice of retransmitting already published information.

It is recommended that RIC employees analyse the opportunities for proactive and targeted work with target groups, such as academic circles, community centres (chitalishta), museums, etc.

Recommendations to TAP MA:

It is recommended that the TAP MA, in reprogramming the program resource, consider the identified opportunities for improvements to address existing deficits.

Recommendations to Beneficiary Municipalities:

To improve project management and better respond to RIC needs, it is recommended that the beneficiary municipalities of the procedures include RIC experts in their project management teams.