# 6th Monitoring Committee meeting - Brief Minutes

## Transnational Cooperation Programme Interreg Balkan-Mediterranean 2014-2020

CCI 2014TC16M4TN003

Approved by the Monitoring Committee online, on 08/12/2020

Approved

Balkan-Mediterranean is co-financed by European Union and National Funds of participating countries

The Monitoring Committee (hereinafter referred to as MC) of the Transnational Interreg Cooperation Programme V-B "Balkan-Mediterranean 2014-2020" assembled for its 6th meeting on 8th of December 2020 online, following an invitation by the Managing Authority of European Territorial Cooperation Programmes (hereinafter MA of ETCP), in agreement with the European Commission and the Partner States.

Ms Mathilde Konstantopoulou, representing the National Authority of Greece, the Special Secretariat for the Management of ERDF & CF Programmes, as Chair of the Monitoring Committee welcomed the participants and opened the 6th Monitoring Committee meeting, highlighting the role of the Programme in regional development.

Mr Goran Milevski, Minister of Local Self-Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, welcomed the participants and expressed the support and willingness of his country to participate in the future BalkanMed Programme.

Mr Gilles Kittel and Ms Nadine Lakhal, representing the European Commission, were also attending.

Quorum was achieved and it was identified that no members of the MC present had a conflict of interest.

The Agenda of the meeting was approved unanimously.

The Table attached presents the participation in the 6th meeting of members with and without voting rights.

The meeting was being recorded.

## 1. Information on the State of Play of the Programme

Mr Themis Chatzikonstantinou, JS, presented the State of Play of the Programme and the developments since the last Monitoring Committee meeting, focusing especially on the implementation of the projects.

Regarding the update on the issues on the FLC in Cyprus, the MA informed the MC that the Audit Authority has sent a letter to the Audit Unit of DG REGIO on 30/11/2020 communicating on the measures taken on the Action Plan. In addition, the MA will reply to the Warning Letter sent by the Commission on 29/07/2020. Ms Nadine Lakhal, European Commission, stressed that this reply will be very important for the potential lift of the interruption of payment claims including parts from Cyprus as it is mentioned as a requirement in the last paragraph of the warning letter.

**The MC acknowledged the content of the presentation.**

## 2. Communication and Capitalisation activities

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Ms Christina Bateka, JS, presented the communication activities undertaken by the Programme so far, as well as those planned for the second half of 2021, according to the requirements of EC Regulations.

**The MC acknowledged the content of the presentation.**

## 3. New Funding Opportunities until 2023

Mr Chatzikonstantinou, JS, presented the situation with the unused Programme funds. The JS submitted a concrete proposal for the launch of a **restricted Targeted Call on "Greening the Digital Sector"**, as the best solution for activating these funds. The goal would be that the Subsidy Contracts of the new Projects will be signed in June 2021.

The Commission suggested whether the funds could be used to increase FLC to ensure flow of liquidity as Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia face slow process, as mentioned during agenda item 1. The JS replied that issues e.g. in Albania have been solved and that the system is running smoothly.

The Commission also suggested whether it would be possible to contract small projects/ micro projects. The MA reply that this kin d of projects is not envisioned during this programming period.

Following a discussion and additional comments, the **MC unanimously approved the launch of the Call and delegated the Managing Authority to proceed, in cooperation with the national authorities, to any arrangements and negotiations necessary for the timely submission and approval of Project Proposals.**

## 4. Study on the Strategic Priorities and Needs of the Southern Balkans – Eastern Mediterranean Area

*Mr Georgios Sgouros (external expert) presented the first deliverables of the study "Defining strategic directives aimed at future cooperation schemes in the SE European/Balkan Peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean Basin, in the context of the Interregional Cooperation Programmes of the European Commission and of other European Initiatives, in the current geopolitical - and economic – dynamic environment"*, commissioned by the Managing Authority following a request by the Partner States. The study primarily deals with the socio-economic situation of the five BalkanMed participating countries.

A discussion, also linked to the future of the BalkanMed Programme, followed.

**The MC acknowledged the content of the presentation.**

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## 5. Future of the BalkanMed Programme

Regarding the continuation of the BalkanMed Programme in the Programming Period 2021-2027, the European Commission made the case that the Managing Authority and the partner states must prove the necessity of the Programme's continuation in relation to the broader architecture of Interreg transnational Cooperation. Mr Gilles Kittel, representative of the Commission, pointed out that most of the challenges pressing the EU today are broader in geography and more complex in scope and impact than any region or country alone can manage. Having this context in mind and taking into account that the East part of the Mediterranean Sea is at the centre of EU's current priorities, the Commission is open to discuss how these priorities could be appropriately reflected in the Interreg architecture, provided that all potential partner countries have expressed similar, firm interest for such priorities and programme architecture. Further to this, the Commission suggests the participating countries to take well into consideration the limited funds for the Interreg Programmes –and especially for Greece – and present any further argumentation on the added value of a dedicated 2021-2027 programme for Eastern Mediterranean.

Ms Mathilde Konstantopoulou, GR, as Chair-person of the Monitoring Committee, reminded that what is at stake is first and foremost the continuation of the BalkanMed Programme as is. She mentioned that all Partner States, as well as the Monitoring Committee, have repeatedly asked from the Commission the continuation of the Programme and sent to the Commission official letters and memos at the highest possible level explaining why the BalkanMed Programme is at the core of the cooperation in South East Europe and an important developmental tool.

Moving on to point by point contradicting the arguments presented in a letter sent by the higher hierarchy of the Commission to the Greek Deputy Minister almost five months after the Deputy Minister's letter expressing the written support to the continuation of the BalkanMed programme, she stated the following: The BalkanMed Programme –though of a limited budget – has managed to involve beneficiaries from all participating countries and presents a high degree of absorption of funds, having obtained the N+3 goal not only for the year 2020, but, by the end of the year, the goal of N+3 for 2021 will be also achieved. So far for the alleged "operational difficulties and delays" of the Programme mentioned in the letter. The inappropriate and highly insulting sentence "several countries have expressed reservations" is also inaccurate, since all countries participating to this Programme have expressed their vivid interest for its continuation.

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In addition, the allegation of "unnecessary and far reaching overlap of Programmes" is unjustified in the letter, since the BalkanMed Programme is the only transnational Programme covering the Balkan area and the Southeast external borders of the European Union and its discontinuation will leave a strategic and operational gap in the Southeast Mediterranean area, let alone that it is the only transnational cooperation Programme to be discontinued for 2021-2027. Two other transnational Programmes that were supposed to be discontinued due to "overlapping activities" will continue their activities for the period 2021-2027.

She also expressed the Greek Ministry of Development and Investments' and the Managing Authority's frustration that the arguments and the will of the Partner States are not taken into account by the Commission.

The Managing Authority expressed its view that the core data on the implementation of the Programme suggests that BalkanMed is a very successful Programme, something not being taken into account by the Commission. On the contrary, it seems that highest ranks of hierarchy in DG REGIO seem misinformed and misled regarding the actual implementation of the Programme, as deriving from the Commissioner's reply to an official letter of the Greek Deputy Minister of Development and Investments. The Managing Authority added that it has not seen any concrete argumentation on the discontinuation of the Programme by the Commission and wondered whether the Commission has asked other Interreg transnational cooperation Programme to prove their standing as it does with BalkanMed and what was their position. All relevant previous decisions of the MC, Concept Note, supporting letters and relevant documentation for the continuation of the BalkanMed Programme are already at the disposal of DG REGIO.

In addition, the reduction of the available funds for Cooperation Programmes in Southern Balkan (CBC and TNC) for the 2021-2027 Period cannot be used as a pretext for the discontinuation of BalkanMed by the European Commission. The participating countries will decide upon the use of the future available funds and the intention of the Commission to ignore the expressed will of participating countries and proceed to the discontinuation of BalkanMed – on top of the reduction of future funds for Cooperation in Southern Balkan area - constitutes a double mistreating.

Mr Milen Obretenov, BG, mentioned that Bulgaria appreciates the efforts of the MA in the negotiation process with the EC and the participating countries regarding the continuation of the BalkanMed programme. Providing that the EC takes a positive decision on the continuation of the programme in the period 2021-2027, Bulgaria could support and search for joint partnerships that would make the future programme more successful and result-oriented for the participating countries.

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Ms Konstantopoulou, GR, stressed that "could" as an answer is not good enough now that the future of the Programme is at stake and reminded the Monitoring Committee that if there is a strong will by all the involved parties for the continuation of the Programme then the Commission will have to accept it and not bring other arrangements regarding the geography of other transnational Programmes to the table.

**In principle, all Partner States expressed their strong support to the continuation of the BalkanMed Programme and committed to keep on with their efforts until a positive outcome.**

## 6. European Commission input on COVID-19 measures

Ms Nadine Lakhal, European Commission, informed the MC on the measures taken and envisaged on behalf of the European Commission regarding the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The MC requested clarifications especially related to direct communication issues with IPA countries faced by the Programme authorities and the beneficiaries. She suggested to send any related issue in writing to the Commission to seek for support where the COVID-19 crisis impacts implementation. Regarding the crossing of borders between Greece and IPA countries, the Commission encourages Member States to keep borders open but it remains to be a national decision.

## 7. Revision of the BalkanMed Programme

The Managing Authority informed that it is planning to submit a Programme revision to the European Commission based on the decision of the 5th Monitoring Committee meeting.

At the end of the meeting, Brief Minutes and Decisions were drafted by the MA and the Chairperson read them out and all MC members approved them.

**Signed**

Albanian Delegation

Bulgarian Delegation

Cypriot Delegation

Republic of North Macedonia Delegation

Greek Delegation

Approved

Managing Authority

**Attached:**

1. Participants' List
2. Agenda

Approved