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Estonia-Russia CBC Programme Mid-Term Evaluation

Final report

Katre Eljas-Taal, Olga Mikheeva, Prof. Valery Gordin, Irina Aleinikova, Anastasia Polomarchuk, Anastasiia Korman

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EST | RUS
Cross Border Cooperation
Programme

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1 Introduction

In July 2020 Technopolis Group in partnership with Saint Petersburg's National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) was commissioned to perform the mid-term evaluation of the Estonia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme (EE-RU CBC) 2014-2020.

The Estonia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme is one of the 15 CBC programmes designed and implemented under the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) 2014-2020. The Estonia-Russia Cross-Border Cooperation Programme is financed by the EU, Republic of Estonia and Russian Federation, in the total amount of €34,2m[1] to be invested following the three main objectives of the Programme: to promote social and economic development in regions on both sides of the common border; to address common challenges in environment, public health, safety and security; and to promote better living conditions and modalities of persons, goods and capital. These strategic objectives also correspond to the vision set in the national strategies of both, Estonia[2] and Russia[3], as well as regional cooperation programmes[4]. The existing EE-RU CBC is building on the experiences and lessons learned from CBC under ENI's predecessor, European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) and EstLatRus CBC Programme implemented during 2007-2013.[5]

The EE-RU CBC area includes the regions of North-East Estonia, South-Estonia and Central-Estonia as well as the city of St. Petersburg and regions of Leningrad and Pskov in the Russian Federation. In addition, North-Estonia (including Tallinn) has a status of adjoining area as well as partners from border regions from Latvia and Finland are eligible associated partners.

According to the EE-RU CBC Joint Operational Programme (JOP), the Programme supports the following activities within the three broader thematic objectives (TO):

TO1 Business and SME development	• Increasing SME development and entrepreneurship by fostering cross-border business contacts and the development of services and products. • Increasing SME competitiveness and entrepreneurship by fostering co-operation between public, private and R&D sectors. • Improving the business environment through the development of business support measures and infrastructure.
TO5 Support to local and regional good governance	• Improving co-operation between local and regional authorities and their sub-units. • improving co-operation between local and regional communities.

[1] According to the Agreement on Financing and Implementation of Cross Border Cooperation Programme "Russia - Estonia" 2014-2020. The total budget €34,2m includes Technical Assistance.

2 Estonian Regional Development Strategy 2014-2020, Estonian Business Development Strategy 2020, Estonian Tourism Development Strategy 2014-2020.

3 Long-Term Socio-Economic Development of the Russian Federation up to the year 2020; 2020 Strategy: New Growth Model - a New Social Policy; State Programme for 2013-2020: 'Regional Policy and Federative Relations'; Russian Federation's Transport Strategy (2008); Protection of the Environment' for 2012-2020; 'Energy Efficiency and Energy Development' for 2013-2020.

4 Macro-regional strategies: Baltic Sea Region 2014-2020 Programme. In addition, local regional programmes in Estonia and Russia were consulted and reflected in the EE-RU CBC Programme.

5 Following a positive Commission's evaluation of the trilateral programme (reference D-020296.01) in terms of implementation of projects, management and technical elements of the implementation, the EE-RU CBC Programme inherited well developed relations between the people, local communities and authorities as well as national agencies and contact points. Therefore, no major changes were identified or recommended for the implementation of EE-RU CBC Programme, according to the Operational Programme document.

TO6 Environmental protection, climate change mitigation and adaptation	• Improving the biodiversity of joint natural assets. • Improving the quality of shared water assets by reducing their pollution load (including improving wastewater treatment facilities, improving solid (household and industrial) waste management and relevant facilities, and reducing pollution that is caused by the agricultural sector. • Increasing awareness of environmental protection and the efficient use of energy resources. • Fostering shared action in risk management and a readiness to cope with environmental disasters.

Initially, all project activities had to be implemented by 31 December 2022. According to the Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2020/879 of 23 June 2020 amending the Regulation 897/2014, projects have to be implemented by 31 December 2023 and payments by end of 2024.

The aim of the mid-term evaluation is to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the EE-RU CBC programme in particular:

1. To what extent the implementation of the Programme on both, the Programme, and project level has been carried out in an efficient and effective way (efficiency).
2. To what extent the results of the selected and contracted projects will be achievable and whether they lead to the achievement of the objectives of the projects and Programme (effectiveness).
3. To give recommendations for improvement of this Programme and input for the Estonia-Russia CBC Programme 2021-2027.

The mid-term evaluation involved 30 projects funded by the start of the evaluation and four EE-RU CBC programme implementing bodies: Joint Monitoring Committee, Managing Authority, Joint Technical Secretariat and National Authorities.

2 Methodology of the evaluation

Since this is a mid-term evaluation, the focus was on assessing the intervention design and implementation of the programme and how it can be improved. In addition to that we captured also first indications of impact the programme will have on its beneficiaries and relevant territories.

The evaluation covered 30 projects contracted between 18 December 2015 (initial approval of the Joint Operational Programme)[6] until 21 September 2020 (signing of this tender contract). The total amount of the 30 contracted projects is €35.8m, out of which Programme funds are €29.6m, which is about 87% of the total Programme budget.[7]

To complete the objectives the research team undertook an analysis of:

- Programme design (the set-up of the programme covering its objectives, thematic areas, management, financial and monitoring system), particularly focusing on the intervention logic, reasoning behind programme design, the expected results and impacts of the three thematic objectives under evaluation. Analysis of programme design was important especially when analysing whether the funded projects will allow the achievement of the objectives of the Programme.
- Programme implementation (covering application, projects' implementation and reporting processes), particularly focusing on information of the thematic objective and individual project level. Analysis of how the programme has been implemented allows evaluating the (current) efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation (and in the case of issues, where are the bottlenecks negatively affecting the implementation). Furthermore, this allowed examining whether the completion of projects will lead to the achievement of the project objectives.
- Expected impact to the extent that it can be detected while the projects are still being implemented. The analysis of expected impacts will also influence the recommendations as the recommendations will either: identify best practices that should continue to be supported for successful completion of the Programme; bottlenecks that are/can be negatively affecting Programme completion as well as actions that would mitigate them.

The evaluation focused on programme authorities and beneficiaries as the main source of data collection and used both a comprehensive desk research and in-depth interviews to collect the data that is primarily qualitative in nature. Most of the evaluation questions were qualitative and focussed on programme implementation as a process. Quality and impact of this process was captured by in-depth analysis of perceptions of those involved in the process/programme supported through detailed background produced through document analysis.

For desk research all EE-RU CBC programme related as well as all contracted 30 projects' documents were analysed. In addition, 21 interviews were conducted with 20 projects' beneficiaries and 10 interviews were conducted with 19 programme authorities' representatives. The interviews were semi-structured, individual or group interviews. Interviews with Russian partners were conducted in Russian, interviews with Estonian partners were conducted either in Estonian or Russian and interview with Joint Technical Secretariat was

[6] The Programme was approved by the EC on 18 December 2015. Financing Agreement was ratified on 12 November 2018. The contracts could be signed in 2 months after the ratification.

[7] Based on eMS data extracted on 20.01.2021

conducted in English. Interviews covered all thematic objectives, all four Large Infrastructure Projects (LIP) and were balanced between Estonian and Russian partners. Summary of provided interviews is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Provided interviews with beneficiaries

Thematic objective	**TO1**	**TO5**	**TO6**	**Total**
Number of projects selected for interviews	8	4	8	20
Projects selected for interviews of which direct award projects (LIP)	3	0	1	4
Projects selected for interviews of which Estonian lead beneficiaries	6	3	3	12
Projects selected for interviews of which Russian lead beneficiaries	1	0	4	5
Projects selected for interviews with Russian beneficiaries (not leading) to ensure country balance	2	1	1	4

Source: authors

As presented in Table 1 1 in total 12 Estonian and 9 Russian beneficiaries were interviewed across the projects under the 3 thematic objectives for a total of 20 projects selected for interviews.

As for interviews with Programme authorities, 10 interviewees across 4 levels of Programme management were interviewed:

- 6 representatives of the Joint Monitoring Committee: 3 Estonian representatives (one group and one individual interview) and 4 Russian representatives (four individual interviews);
- 3 representatives of the Managing Authority (one group interview);
- 7 representatives of the Joint Technical Secretariat - 5 representatives from the office in Tartu (one group interview) and one from both offices in St. Petersburg and Pskov (two individual interviews);
- 2 representatives of the National Authorities, one from the Estonian Ministry of Finance and one from the Russian Ministry of Economic Development[8].

Quotes from interviews are presented in the report illustrating the analysis.

Data collected during the desk research enabled to analyse to what extent the project output indicators support reaching the Programme outcome indicators. Result indicators were not evaluated in this evaluation as result indicators will only be assessed once the Programme is completed.

[8] From the Ministry of Economic Development of Russian Federation only one representative was interviewed instead of initially planned two representatives. One representative preferred not to be interviewed.

3 Efficiency of the Estonia – Russia CBC Programme implementation

In this chapter the efficiency of the EE-RU CBC programme is assessed. Efficiency shows how well are Programme resources used. It will analyse and assess whether the implementation of the Programme on both, the Programme, and project level has been carried out in the most efficient way and how it can be improved. The chapter starts with brief overview of the Programme intervention logic and follows with assessment on every related evaluation question. Conclusions and recommendations based on this chapter are given in Chapter 5.

3.1 Programme intervention logic

The EE-RU CBC programme is launched and co-financed under the European Neighbourhood Instrument and is agreed between the European Commission, the Republic of Estonia and the Russian Federation. The strategic objectives of the Programme are derived from the ENI wider objectives at the same time meeting the goals of the two participating countries (see Strategic Objectives on Figure 1). Programme strategic objectives are supported by Thematic Objectives (TO) described in the ENI programming document[9]. There are 11 thematic objectives in the ENI programming document out of which initially four were selected for the EE-RU CBC programme meeting the strategic objectives of the two participating countries (see Thematic Objectives on Figure 1). The four thematic objectives were selected on the basis of countries' strategic economic, social and regional policy objectives involving wide range of stakeholders. Finally, as the only project submitted for one thematic objective (TO10), was withdrawn, the three thematic objectives are covered in 2014-2020 Programme (TO1, TO5, TO6).

The Programme's main objectives, expected results as well as monitoring and implementation system are described in the Joint Operational Programme 2014-2020 (JOP)[10], which preparation was launched in June 2013 and was approved in December 2018 (the JOP was agreed in 2015, but the Financing Agreement between the Republic of Estonia and the Russian Federation entered into force in 2019, which enabled actual contracting of projects). The JOP is originally drafted and approved in English, but unofficial translations into Estonian and Russian are also available. The JOP document, being an annex to the Financing Agreement, sets main terms and conditions for the Programme. In addition, Guidelines for Applicant[11] set the framework for preparation, submission and evaluation of grant applications and set of guidelines for beneficiaries[12] guarantee the projects are implemented according to the agreed rules. Official language of the Programme is English.

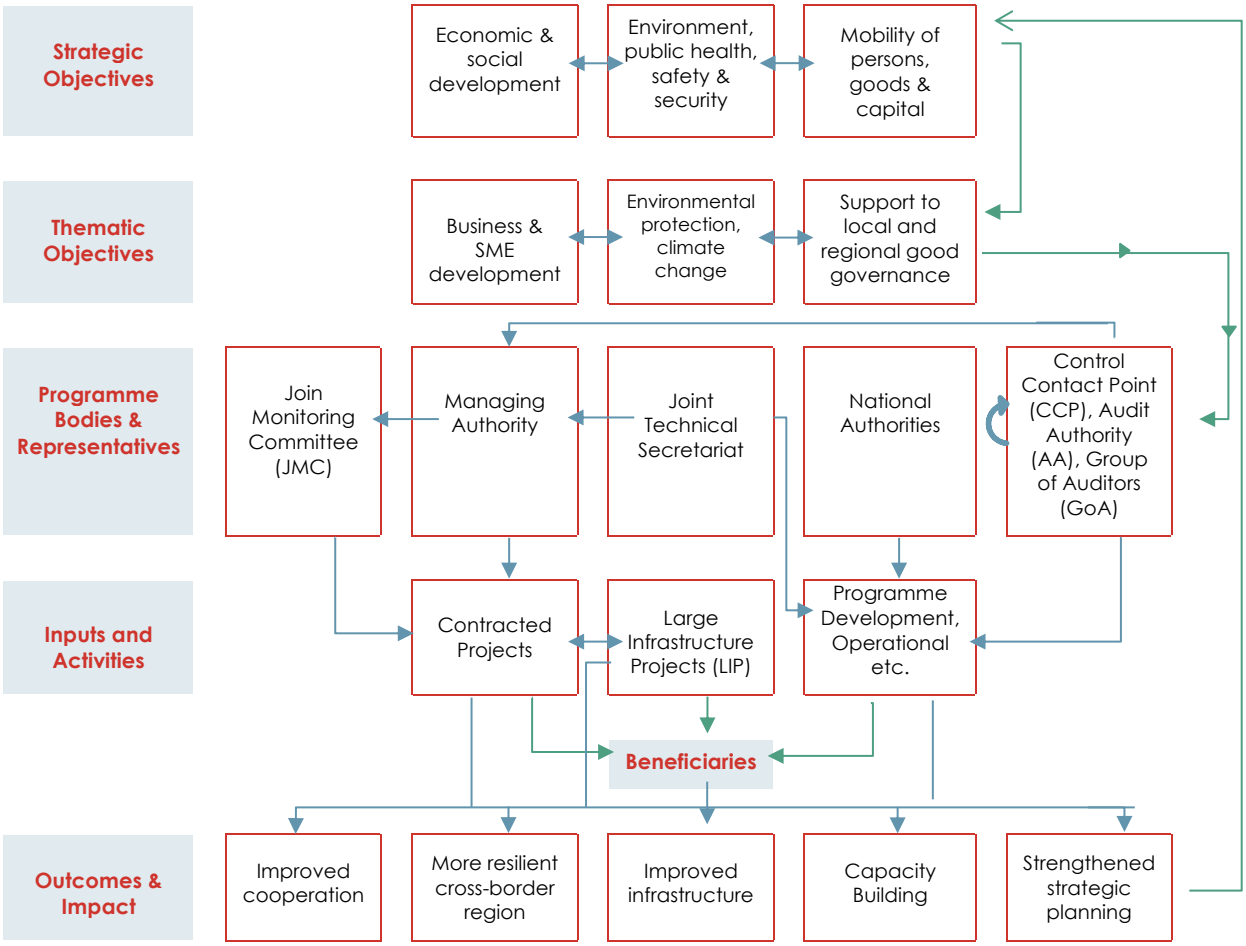
[9] ENI Programming document 2014-2020, ENI Cross Border Cooperation, https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/pdf/financing-the-enp/cbc_2014-2020_programming_document_en.pdf

[10] Joint Operational Programme 2014-2020, https://www.Estoniarusia.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/JOP_approved_2020_08_07.pdf

[11] Documents for Applicant, https://www.Estoniarusia.eu/documents-for-applicant/

[12] Documents for Beneficiary, https://www.EEoniaRUsia.eu/documents-for-beneficiary/

Figure 1 Programme intervention logic



Source: authors on the basis of Programme documents

The three thematic objectives are implemented through individual projects and large infrastructure projects (LIP) (see Inputs and Activities on Figure 1). Individual projects are granted on competitive basis through open calls and LIPs are awarded directly. Every project involves at least two partners from both sides of the Estonia-Russia border. Eligible applicants are NGOs; national, regional and local public authorities; public equivalent bodies; educational organisations and SMEs (only under TO1). Lead beneficiaries and beneficiaries must be located within the Programme area. It has to be mentioned that Estonian SMEs participating in the Programme have to follow also state aid rules.

Three types of projects can be funded:

- Integrated projects in which each partner carries out part of the activities of a joint project on its respective side of the border;
- Symmetrical projects in which similar activities are carried out in parallel within the territory of Estonia and Russia;
- Single-country projects with a cross-border effect, which take place mainly or entirely on one side of the border, but which are for the benefit of all beneficiaries.

All projects are cross-border in nature, having at least one partner in Estonian side of the Programme area and at least one in the Russian side of the Programme area. However, the programme is not financing any single-country projects.

Individual projects have been selected through three Calls for proposals. The main aims and characteristics of calls are the same, but focus or some requirements vary due to the level of fulfilment of Programme indicators, time or budget left until the end of the Programme implementation. Said this, the first call was open for all TOs, but in the result there were no projects under TO6. The second call was targeted only for TO6 specific area "Fostering shared action in risk management and a readiness to cope with environmental disasters". Similarly, after the first call there were not enough projects approved under TO5 to achieve the Programme indicators, the third call targeted only TO5 through one stage application process in order to make it faster. LIPs are contracted by direct award based on European Commission approval. Main characteristics of the Calls for proposals and LIPs are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Main characteristics of the Calls for proposals and LIPs

	1st Call for proposals	**2nd Call for proposals**	**3rd Call for proposals**	**Large Infrastructure Projects (LIP)**
Period of submission of applications	17.01.2017 – 04.05.2017 - Project Summary Form[13] 14.02.2018 – Full Application Forms	10.01.2018 – 07.03.2018 - Project Summary Form 12.12.2018 - Full Application Forms	25.11.2019 – 21.02.2020	Contracts before 30 June 2019
Thematic objectives	TO1, TO5, TO6	TO6	TO5	TO1, TO5, TO6, TO10[14]
Eligible areas of the Programme	Programme areas Involvement of adjoining region North-Estonia (including Tallinn) is only allowed under TO1 and TO6.		Only Programme areas (adjoining regions are not eligible)	Programme areas Involvement of adjoining region North-Estonia (including Tallinn) is only allowed under TO1 and TO6. The Programme area on the Russian side includes Moscow as a major economic, social and cultural centre.
Total amount available (€)	10,000,476	870,000	432,373	20,477,108
Min amount of grant (€)	50,000	50,000	50,000	NA
Max amount of grant (€)	TO1: 500,000 TO5: 150,000 TO6: 600,000	400,000	100,000	NA

[13] As the Programme Financing Agreement was still under ratification by the Russian Parliament, the 1st Call for proposals was carried out and grant decisions were concluded, but projects actually started only after ratification of the Financing Agreement in November 2018. The first contracts were signed in the beginning of 2019.

[14] Thematic objective 10 (Promotion of border management and border security, mobility and migration management) was at the time of developing the JOP among strategic objectives of Programme. However, due to the long preparatory phase of the projects, long approval of the FA for Russian side the implementation left for the project was not enough in order to finalise the planned activities. Estonian side decided to continue with border crossing point development but to finance it from its own state budget funds not seeing a need to involve EE-RU CBC funds and to avoid Programme reporting obligations. Also, the period of approval of the Programme document should be considered from the time it was submitted to the EC for approval. That was done in June 2015. But the preparation pf the LIPs started earlier along with the preparation of the JOP ca since 2014.

Eligible applicants	All eligible applicants described in JOP[15]		
Partnership requirement	At least two beneficiaries (the applicant and at least one project partner), of whom at least one beneficiary is from the Republic of Estonia and at least one beneficiary from the Russian Federation. Also eligible: partners from Finland and Latvia	At least two beneficiaries, of whom at least one beneficiary is from the Republic of Estonia and at least one beneficiary from the Russian Federation.	At least two beneficiaries (the applicant and at least one project partner), of whom at least one beneficiary is from the Republic of Estonia and at least one beneficiary from the Russian Federation.
Duration of the project	Max 24 months for projects not exceeding €200,000 Max 36 months for projects exceeding €200,000	Max 12 months	The project duration cannot exceed 31 December 2022
Co-financing rate	Not less than 10% Every beneficiary has to co-finance the project with at least 10% contribution of their own part of the project budget For the small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) participating in the project from the Russian Federation the maximum co-financing from the Programme cannot exceed 50% of the total eligible costs for respective project partner. Participation of SME is allowed only under TO1 Business and SME development[5]. SMEs cannot act as the applicant (lead beneficiary) of the project.	10%	Not less than 10%. Every beneficiary has to co-finance the project with at least 10% contribution of their own part of the project budget

Source: authors based on www.estoniarussia.eu

All projects are expected to contribute into achieving the Programme objectives and results (see Outcomes and Impact on Figure 1). Expected results are set for every thematic objective and are measured through output and result indicators. Programme *output indicators* are translated into projects' output indicators and are monitored throughout the whole Programme implementation period, whereas *result indicators* are measured only after all projects will be finished and the Programme will be closed. Current mid-term evaluation helps to understand to what extent the expected results will be achieved in the most effective and efficient way, while normally the ex-post evaluation would give feedback on expected impact and change of the intervention. Both evaluations would give feedback to the new period programming cycle and serve as inputs into development of new strategic objectives and thematic areas.

The EE-RU CBC programme is implemented on three levels: on strategic (European Commission, Joint Monitoring Committee, including National Authorities), monitoring (JMC, Control Contact Point, Managing Authority, Audit Authority, Group of Auditors) and implementation (Managing Authority, Joint Technical Secretariat with two branch offices in St.

[15] In addition to the general Programme requirements, an exclusive competence of the applicant for LIP has to be proved. According to the provisions of Implementing Rules, article 41, "Direct award", the grant can be awarded under the following conditions: 1) the body to which a Project is awarded enjoys a de jure of de facto monopoly; 2) the Project relates to actions with specific characteristics that require a particular type of body based on its technical competence, high degree of specialisation or administrative power.

Petersburg and Pskov) levels (see Programme Bodies and Representatives on Figure 1). Every programme authority has its role and responsibility (see Table 3).

Table 3 Programme authorities, their roles and responsibilities

Programme authority	Role and responsibility	Involvement in the mid-term evaluation
Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC)	In charge of high-level decision making as well as decisions made regarding grants and overall monitoring of programme implementation	Involved in mid-term evaluation
Managing Authority (MA)	Managing programme and executing decision made by the JMC. The MA is responsible for efficient and correct management of the Programme.	Involved in mid-term evaluation
Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS)	Day-to-Day operations and financial management of projects	Involved in mid-term evaluation
National Authorities (NA)	National authorities appointed on behalf of the participating countries	Involved in mid-term evaluation
Control Contact Point (CCP)	Assisting the Managing Authority in control and legal framework	Not involved in mid-term evaluation
Audit Authority (AA)	Developing and managing auditing standards	Not involved in mid-term evaluation
Group of Auditors (GoA)	Representatives appointed by each participating country to assist the Audit Authority	Not involved in mid-term evaluation

Source: authors based on www.estoniarussia.eu

3.2 Coherence of the Programme intervention design

The chapter discusses the following questions:

- Is the intervention design of the Programme coherent? Whether and how can it be improved?
- Does the framework as defined by the Programme allow the project beneficiaries to implement their projects in the most efficient way? What are the obstacles? How can the implementation be improved?
- Do the performance and responsibilities of the Programme authorities ensure the effective and efficient implementation of the Programme? Should anything be changed?
- Are the financial and human resources foreseen for the management of the Programme sufficient and used in the most efficient way?
- To analyse whether the output and result indicators of the Programme are adequately established?
- How do the project beneficiaries assess the Programme documents? Are the documents understandable and easy or difficult to follow? How can the documents be improved?

3.2.1 *Coherence and efficiency of Programme intervention design*

The nature of the EE-RU CBC Programme dictates the complexity of the intervention. There are many layers, which make the Programme complex: the three counterparts of the Programme (the EU, the Republic of Estonia and the Russian Federation), the multilevel programming (EU, MA, NA, JMC) and implementation system (MA, JTS, AA, CCP) makes the whole Programme framework complex and heavy. Preparation of the current 2014-2020 period (including programming of the JOP followed by approval by the EC and ratification of the Financing Agreement by the Russian Federation) took six years (2013-2018) before actual funding was granted. When in bilateral cooperation programmes the two counterparts agree on joint objectives and terms and conditions, then in the EE-RU CBC programme the EU as third counterpart sets the basic framework for the whole EU cooperation with external border countries as well as Russian Federation sets the framework for its cross-border cooperation with neighbours, in the result of which the two cross-border countries Estonia and Russia operate within the set frameworks[16]. Also, as an example, within the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) the EU and member country operate in the same legal environment, but in EE-RU CBC programme the counterparts operate in different legal environments, which is the main reason why the EE-RU CBC Programme is seen very complex and heavy. While the complexity of the Programme is rather well accepted by Russian beneficiaries, then Estonian beneficiaries find it too bureaucratic and slow in its terms and conditions as well as implementation system. The main reason behind this is that Russian beneficiaries are used to complex and bureaucratic set up, while Estonian beneficiaries in the opposite are used to simple and quick management system. Also, in the light of previous experiences of Estonian beneficiaries (and potential applicants) with other programmes (especially naming ESIF and other EU programmes) they find the EE-RU CBC Programme procedures complicated. At the same time for Russian beneficiaries the choice for investment sources is narrower. However, beneficiaries from both sides of the border appreciate the opportunities EE-RU Programme offers. Nevertheless, all beneficiaries, not depending on which side of the border they come from, would appreciate more simple procedures within the boundaries of national legislation. While the complexity and bureaucratic implementation system is acceptable for non-profit and public applicants, then it is the main barrier for SMEs to apply for the grant. Also, long evaluation process of applications (4-6 months from the submission of applications until grant decision) is somewhat problematic for profit-driven organisations as they don't have time to wait four months until they can start do anything.

Multilevel governance and operating in two different legal environments make the Programme implementation complicated

In addition to the core regions of the Programme – South-East Estonia, South-Estonia, Mid-Estonia and St. Petersburg, Leningrad and Pskov regions - the Programme involves also adjoining regions (North-Estonia, Latvia and Finland). Involvement of adjoining regions in the Programme is well justified for giving the maximum value from cross border cooperation and knowledge transfer. For sustainability of already existing relationships the approach of adjoining regions is recommended to keep as it is. However, for maximising the Programme impact, the main focus of the Programme has to remain on border regions.

[16] There are also Cross Border Cooperation programmes under European Cohesion policy – European Territorial Cooperation goal - where are two counterparts (Member States) in developing the programme.

Having said this, even if Estonian beneficiaries would like to have quicker and simple procedures for EE-RU programme, all interviewed beneficiaries and Programme authorities found the Programme very relevant and necessary. The Programme offers targeted and tailored support improving cross-border socio-economic environment and making local people's living conditions better. Also, both hard investments into infrastructure and people-to-people type of projects are very welcome as they help strengthen cooperation between people and authorities from both sides of the border.

All stakeholders find the EE-RU CBC Programme appropriate and necessary

Therefore, the Programme should definitely be continued. Knowing the ENI framework the multilevel programming and implementation system of the Programme will most probably stay as part of the CBC type of intervention due to the very different legal environments of the EU and non-EU countries.

On Programme strategy level it is the responsibility of Joint *Monitoring Committee* (JMC) to monitor the implementation of the Programme. JMC approves all Programme strategic documents, which set up the implementation system, but also monitors the implementation and reaching Programme objectives. Also, JMC approves the results of the applications' evaluation process. JMC has representatives from all Programme levels and Programme eligible regions from both sides of the border. JMC is chaired on annually rotating principle representing the Republic of Estonia and the Russian Federation. In general, the functions and role of JMC are optimal and clear for the Programme authorities, JMC members as well as beneficiaries. The function of *Managing Authority* (MA) is performed by the State Shared Service Centre (SSSC) in Estonia. The MA is responsible for implementation and financial management of the Programme. On a day-to-day basis the Programme implementation function is given to the JTS, which is legally also part of the SSSC. While the role of MA is to manage the whole Programme, then the role of *National Authorities* (NA) in Estonia and Russia is to manage the Programme on national level. This includes management system set up, coordination between institutions participating in the management of the Programme on national level and representing the country in the JMC. Both JMC and MA admitted the Programme intervention logic is adequate in the existing legal environment. However, JMC finds the Programme development period rather long, which in turn reduces attractivity of the Programme. Also, in order to make the Programme more efficient adjustments of basic Programme documents should be made quicker – it was recommended to proceed with adjustments as they appear, not waiting for a bunch of changes to be made. JMS finds the management system functioning well and they are sufficiently supported by JTS. However, for fully performing monitoring function JMC could be equipped with overall information about the state of play of projects' implementation and existing problems more frequently. Similarly, they find the Programme not being sufficiently visible in public sphere – wider public is not aware about EE-RU Programme investments into border regions.

While on first sight there seem to be many institutions and levels involved, then in order to meet the sound financial management and implementation principles laid down in the ENI programming document, the functions of different bodies in the management system have to be clearly distinguished and any conflict of interest has to be eliminated. The segregation of duties is therefore necessary and related to the overall set up of the European Neighbourhood Instrument makes it out of the scope from Estonian or Russian authorities to make any significant adjustments. While the Programme authorities understand the overall management system of the Programme well, then for beneficiaries the main contact point is JTS, sometimes they also relate to MA, making the other management system bodies less relevant for them. Said this, it

is not a problem for the Programme implementation as single contact point (JTS) to perform the Programme communication and clarity is easier for the beneficiary.

Joint Technical Secretariat plays a central role in implementation of the Programme. JTS assists MA in implementation of the Programme. They are responsible for daily activities in providing calls for proposals, projects' coordination and advice, financial and performance monitoring of the projects as well as Programme reporting. Due to their central role in the Programme, the efficiency of the JTS determines the efficiency of the programme. As JTS is involved in all processes in implementation of the Programme, their internal processes have to be managed the most efficient way in order not becoming a bottleneck for the Programme. In 2014-2020 implementation period JTS has performed its role efficiently. There was no major issue or barrier in JTS observed during interviews – beneficiaries find JTS working quickly and efficiently. The amount and level of information shared by JTS centrally for all beneficiaries is rather sufficient, the Programme Consultants are always available for consultation, trainings and seminars provided by JTS are useful and informative, information flows are quick, and JTS staff is always very friendly. However, some interviewees mentioned that when the number of contracted projects grow, the more JTS workflow increases leaving less time and attention for beneficiaries. Similarly, JTS confirmed that their workload increased significantly after new projects were approved by the JMC – all projects started at the same time and they were all at the same stage of implementation. This, in hand may cause delays in communication and finding solutions for projects. Concern about workflow increase and JTS capacity being efficient in the near future was also expressed by JTS itself and MA. Based on interviews it can be observed that even under the pressure of growing workflow JTS is mostly accurate – all beneficiaries queries get their feedback in line with Programme terms and conditions and legal framework. Only in more complicated cases JTS involves MA or NA, which prolongs the feedback process. Said this, some interviewees admitted that in some complicated legal issues (mainly related to the public procurements) even after consultation with MA the responsibility of the final decision was left to the beneficiary. In those situations, beneficiary expected to get clear guidance what was eligible and what was not, but no clear guidance was received nor from JTS or MA.

In 2014-2020 implementation period JTS has performed its role efficiently

In overall, the Programme authorities' roles and responsibilities are clear and the system works efficiently. As already decided by the JMC the JTS branch offices would be given more responsibility in managing projects, which in turn is expected to release some time of the head office Programme Consultants. Based on the document analysis and interviews, there are no grounds observed that the Programme objectives would not be achieved – the Programme implementation system works well, all rules and procedures are in place, roles of Programme authorities are clear and relationships between Programme authorities are very good.

"Functions of JTS branch offices (again). They should be involved in main functions of secretariat. There should be legal, procurement, contracts specialists. Hard to plan and implement without it."

"The intervention design of CBC has rather become more user-friendly by time being. It cannot be said that these programmes have become less complicated, but perhaps procedures have been described and opened more."

"The biggest added value of a CBC programme is strengthened cross-border relationships – through joint activities people on both sides of the border learn to know each other. I see people-to-people type of projects having the highest impact – cultural and societal cohesion increases."

"There can be more simplification of costs' reporting – as an example, lump sum based on a project or thematic objective could be introduced."

"The Programme has to be made simpler. As an example, a fund for small projects could be considered with very simple rules on application and implementation."

3.2.2 *Relevance of Programme indicators*

At a time the Programme was developed output and result indicators were identified, particularly, Common Output Indicators (COI) and result Indicators (RI). The COI were chosen from the list of indicators of the ENI CBC 2014-2020 methodology and Programme specific indicators (ERI) were selected to measure Programme specific performance. When output indicators were expected to measure the Programme's immediate output and are collected throughout the Programme implementation period, then result indicators were set to measure wider societal impact of the Programme and are collected only after the end of the Programme. Therefore, in current mid-term evaluation only output indicators are analysed.

Output indicators are related to operations supported and are expected to measure what is the direct output of the intervention. In the EE-RU CBC programme output is measured on the level of the number of organisations, (cultural) objects or companies benefitted from the Programme, number of people (or size of the target group) involved into the project activities as well as size of the land, region or population affected by the intervention.

Result indicators capture the expected effects on target groups by intervention. Result indicators correspond to the specific objectives of the Programme and they go beyond output indicators in so far as they capture a change in the situation. As the result indicators are collected only after the end of the Programme, current mid-term evaluation does not assess the change the intervention has caused.

Output and result indicators were identified for every TO respectively as presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Programme output and result indicators

TO	Priority	Output indicator	Result indicator[17]
TO 1	Increasing SME development and entrepreneurship by fostering cross-border business contacts and developing services and products	Number of enterprises that are substantially and actively involved in projects as final beneficiaries	The strength of joint development in products and services by businesses
		Number of improved cultural and historical sites as a direct consequence of programme support	Attractiveness of cultural and heritage sites to visitors
	Increasing SME competitiveness and entrepreneurship by fostering cooperation between the public, private and R&D sectors	Number of organisations using programme support for cooperation in education, R&D, and innovation	The strength of cross- border activities by institutions in education, R&D, and innovation sectors
	Improving the business environment through the development of business support measures and infrastructure	Number of organisations using programme support for promoting local culture and preserving historical heritage	The quality of the cross- border business environment
TO 5	Improving cooperation between local and regional authorities and their sub-units	The number of participating organisations cooperating across borders for improved governance	Accessibility of cross border social, health and sporting services, and vocational and language training
	Improving cooperation for local and regional communities	The number of participants at events that are aimed at vocational and language training	
TO 6	Improving the quality of shared water assets by means of reducing their pollution load, including improving wastewater treatment facilities, improving solid waste management and relevant facilities (for both household and industrial waste) and reducing the pollution that is caused by the agricultural sector	The number of projects that are related to the purification of common water assets	Increased capacity in environmental protection for joint water assets
	Improving the biodiversity of joint natural assets	Additional waste recycling capacity (by number of improved facilities)	
	Increasing awareness in environmental protection and the efficient use of energy resources	The number of persons actively participating in environmental actions and awareness-raising activities	Increased awareness in environmental protection and energy efficiency amongst inhabitants and institutions in the Programme area
	Fostering shared actions in risk management and a readiness to cope with environmental disasters	Members of the population who benefit from forest fire protection measures	A decrease of the overall number of land and forest fires per year

Source: authors based on JOP

In general, the Programme output indicators measure the Programme immediate outcome rather well – adequate and measurable metrics and units are used. However, the phrasing

[17] For measuring the impact of the Programme, two surveys are provided: one in the beginning of the Programme to set the initial state of play and the other one after the end of the Programme to measure the achieved results. The survey is sent to public authorities, local municipalities, business organisations, tourism organisations and other public organisations and NGOs. Also, different field experts give their opinion. The survey has a series of questions measures on scale 1-10.

'number of projects supported' (TO6 COI: *The number of projects that are related to the purification of common water assets*) remains somewhat unclear – the measurement level is not the same as in other output indicators – number of participating organisations or number of participants. Therefore, the rephrasing of the indicator could be considered like 'size of water assets supported' or 'the number of water facilities supported'.

In principle, the Programme result indicators are appropriate in terms of TO priorities, but in case of TO1 and TO5 it is not clear what change is measured. As an example, it is unclear what is measured by the indicator *'The strength of joint development in products and services by businesses'* (TO1 RI). It is expected that in the result of the implemented projects the '*Number of enterprises that are substantially and actively involved in projects as final beneficiaries'* (TO1 COI) will lead to '*Increase in joint development in products and services by businesses' (TO1 RI)*. Or '*The quality of the cross- border business environment*' (TO1 RI) should measure '*Increase in the quality of the cross-border business environment*'. Therefore, the Programme result indicators are recommended to be rephrased in order to measure the expected change of the intervention.

3.2.3 Clarity of Programme documents

The majority of interviewed beneficiaries find the JOP and related documents in overall clear and understandable, however, the Programme documents offer variety of interpretation opportunities making 'do's and don'ts' sometimes unclear for beneficiaries. Particularly, the Communication and Visibility Guidelines were mentioned several times – beneficiaries often use social media for presenting project results, but as the space for the message is limited it's complicated to squeeze the project and Programme logos and the message into the text area. When in overall beneficiaries accept the Programme communication and visibility guidelines, they'd expect here some more flexibility in using social media, as an example to play with the size of Programme and project logos in order to use the social media text field the most efficient way. Also, newcomers or less experienced beneficiaries find the programme documents difficult to navigate and understand. More experienced beneficiaries are already used to the CBC programme rules and feel more comfortable with finding relevant information from Programme documents and understanding the content. However, there was no specific recommendations given by beneficiaries or Programme authorities how to improve the documents. In overall, all interviewed beneficiaries concluded that the Programme documents are clear and there is no need for major improvements, the issue is rather about interpretation of rules.

> In overall, Programme documents are clear and understandable. However, there are many details, which can be interpreted differently.

As a conclusion, the most efficient way for managing beneficiaries' queries for interpretation of the Programme documents is still consultation with JTS. Beneficiaries value face-to-face consultations and seminars provided by JTS and find them very useful. Therefore, some of beneficiaries suggested that the amount of such face-to-face seminars could be potentially increased during the implementation phases where beneficiaries could learn from each other and further strengthen the knowledge of the programme's intervention logic, communication methods, etc. In addition, for making the Programme documents more user-friendly and clear more visualisation can be used. For example, the application process can be visualised, including video guidance how to submit the application and what are the requirements. Also, the implementation process can be described in video clips (using eMS, reporting process, do's and don'ts in reporting, how to calculate costs or building the budget etc).

"In making the guidelines more user-friendly, use visualisation, streamline, bring examples."

"It would be nice to add visualisation, it also should take into account the national legislation (e.g. requirement to press releases – guidelines of the CBC says that official templates should be used for press releases but Russian templates contain a lot of headings and footers which makes publications difficult, issuing press releases on official letterheads is not really needed."

"It would be good to translate documents to national languages, including communication guidelines. Often the project manager acts as the translator. Sometimes on the Russian side, especially in smaller counties (Ivangorod) where English speaking person does not know any of project details/work. This complicates further."

"Visibility was an issue, all evaluations have visibility and communication (logo is not in the right place) – we had to spend some time following these requirements, which could be potentially avoided or be more flexible."

In overall, the EE-RU CBC Programme resources are used efficiently.

In conclusion:

- Programme intervention design is appropriate. The ENI legal framework lays down the main terms and conditions and there is not much room for manoeuvres by Estonian or Russian parties. Slight adjustments can be made in shortening the applications' assessment process and strengthening JTS capacity to absorb projects. Long procedures of proposals' evaluation and implementation impacts the efficiency of the Programme.
- Programme set up is rather complicated and programme documents often enable interpretation of rules, making implementation of projects unclear and unstable for beneficiaries. While beneficiaries accept Programme terms and conditions, they'd rather expect some more flexibility in interpretation of rules within the framework of the Programme.
- Programme output and result indicators are adequately established, but it is recommended that the result indicators of TO1 and TO5 would be rephrased in order to measure the expected change of the intervention.
- Programme documents are rather seen as clear and understandable. There is no urgent need for making any major adjustments. Even if JOP and project implementation rules are updated upon the need, the real-life cases still offer larger variety of issues, where interpretation of rules is needed. Programme authorities may consider more flexibility in interpretation of Programme documents.

4 Effectiveness of the Estonia – Russia CBC Programme implementation

In this chapter the effectiveness of the EE-RU CBC programme is assessed. Effectiveness shows to what extent the intervention achieves its objectives. It will analyse and assess to what extent the results of the projects will be achieved and to what extent it will lead to achieving the Programme objectives. The chapter starts with assessment of effectiveness of the Programme intervention, follows with assessment on projects' ability to reach their objectives as well as identifying the expected change and Covid-19 impacts on Programme objectives. Conclusions and recommendations based on this chapter are given in Chapter 5.

The chapter discusses the following questions:

- What is the project beneficiaries' experience regarding cooperation with the MA and the JTS including branch offices in St. Petersburg and Pskov? Is the provided support, by whatever means, sufficient? What are the beneficiaries most satisfied with and what needs to be improved?
- How do the project beneficiaries assess the established procedures including the electronic monitoring system, and simplification of them? Has simplification applied so far helped to save the resources? How can the Programme simplify further?
- Whether the projects' outputs lead to the achievement of the results?
- What are the obstacles and facilitating factors in the implementation of the projects and achievement of results?
- Which obstacles have the beneficiaries experienced in the implementation of the project due to COVID-19 outbreak and how were these obstacles addressed? Have the Programme measures as regards addressing the problems caused by COVID-19 been adequate and helpful?

4.1 Effectiveness of Programme intervention

The main Programme contact point for beneficiaries is JTS. Beneficiaries communicate with JTS on daily basis and they feel free to contact JTS Programme Consultant whenever they have any question to ask or issue to discuss. Every project has its JTS consultant, guaranteeing beneficiaries are always listened and supported. JTS employees altogether speak three languages – English, Estonian and Russian – making communication with JTS comfortable for all beneficiaries as they can speak in their native language if they want. JTS Programme Consultants are located in the head office in Tartu and in two branch offices in Pskov and St. Petersburg. The idea of having branch offices is to bring JTS closer to Russian beneficiaries enabling them to get support in their national language. So far, the concept of branch offices has worked well and based on interviews with beneficiaries and Programme authorities it can be observed that Programme Consultants in branch offices are also becoming overloaded with projects' coordination and supporting beneficiaries. This brings us to the observation that even if the Programme intervention design is complicated and documents allow variety of interpretation, requiring beneficiaries' tight contact with JTS, beneficiaries appreciate human contact and support by JTS extremely highly.

All interviewed beneficiaries expressed their gratitude towards JTS – they are always heard, Programme Consultants are friendly and very professional. Beneficiaries feel that they are not left alone with complicated CBC legal framework and they are always supported. There were no serious issues with JTS mentioned by beneficiaries, JTS is eager to find solutions and co-think together with the beneficiary. Also, beneficiaries find communication with JTS fast and constructive, they get answers to their questions rather fast. In more complicated questions, like issues with public procurements, JTS in turn may consult with MA or NA and in these cases Programme authorities' feedback may take more time. Based on Programme document review and interviews with beneficiaries, it can be observed that in given circumstances (complexity of the Programme intervention design and very detailed documents) JTS is performing efficiently.

Interaction between Programme authorities is professional, friendly and smooth.

There were a couple of issues beneficiaries underlined, which could be paid more attention by JTS. While beneficiaries appreciate very much opportunity to consult their project idea before submitting their application, the consultation is expected to be in their native language. This would make Programme's terms and conditions clearer for beneficiaries and they'd feel safer about entering into the 'CBC programme world'.

The Programme official language is English and all beneficiaries accept that. Nevertheless, the language issue was heavily brought on table during interviews with beneficiaries. There was no particular single issue regarding language presented, but the importance of language rather depends on beneficiary's ability speaking English. Projects, where the leading beneficiary speaks well English and project beneficiaries have long-term partnership (and they have provided CBC projects before) there is no issue about language – they normally speak both Russian and English and can communicate within the project beneficiaries and with JTS. The language issue becomes more complicated when one of the beneficiaries does not speak English on sufficient level in order to understand Programme documents well enough. In this case the project manager has to translate if not all necessary Programme documents, then making Programme terms and conditions understandable for all beneficiaries. This is what frustrates the beneficiaries the most – that the project manager has to spend their time on translating and explaining what the 'do's and don'ts' are. It significantly reduces project's efficiency. In overall, communication with JTS is available in three languages and this is rather satisfactory for beneficiaries. However, they'd appreciate JTS making sure all Programme related information would be made available in three languages – English, Estonian and Russian - in order to make 'do's and don'ts' explicitly clear for all beneficiaries.

Translation of documents for beneficiaries into Estonian and Russian languages would be very much welcomed by beneficiaries.

In order to release JTS head office workload and make communication with JTS more beneficiary-friendly, the decision on giving more responsibility to JTS branch offices was very much welcomed especially by Russian beneficiaries. Empowering branch offices also follows the original plan to establish JTS-like office on the Russian side, which, however, did not materialise. At the moment, the two branch offices *de facto* perform a lot of functions similar to JTS and have already developed a lot of relevant knowledge and competences, which further speaks in favour of granting these offices more powers in implementation's decision-making. This will greatly facilitate the 'translation' of regulations between the two countries and to strengthen the learning process in terms of project coordination and implementation on the Russian side. Furthermore, making the Programme rules clearer for beneficiaries, JTS may also want to consider translating documents for beneficiaries (i.e. all documents related to the

implementation of a project)[18] into Estonian and Russian languages. This is one-time effort and in addition to making the Programme rules clearer it is also expected decreasing JTS workload in future.

As there have been less contacts with other Programme authorities by beneficiaries, there were no issues presented during interviews. The only thing mentioned by beneficiaries was that once their question has been forwarded to MA (or NA) it takes much longer to get feedback and once the feedback arrives, it is rather formal (it's rather in format of interpretation of the law and not 'do or don't'). However, beneficiaries understand the formality of MA feedback and appreciate JTS explanations to the formal feedback.

Based on Programme documents review and interviews it can be observed that beneficiaries are satisfied with cooperation with JTS and MA. They are the most satisfied with availability of JTS Programme Consultants to support them as well as their professionalism in looking for solutions. Also, JTS openness and speed in giving responses are most appreciated. On the other hand, beneficiaries would expect the documents for beneficiaries would be made available also in Russian and Estonian making the Programme 'do's and don'ts' clearer for beneficiaries. Overall, the Programme management system is well focussed on achieving Programme objectives. Based on the results of the mid-term evaluation there is no evidence found, which would not allow the Programme reaching its indicators.

"Answers on our questions were given without delay and communication was good."

"Communication with JTS is very good. Information flows are fast and we communicate frequently. I think the effectiveness of communication depends also from the proactivity of the beneficiary."

"We feel support by the Programme and that we are not alone."

"Interaction with JTS is very good. Communication is fast. Roles are clear. When there are issues related to many projects, we always discuss and JTS help us find the solution. I think programme guidelines are also adjusted based on actual implementation issues."

"Communication with JTS is very good and smooth. They rather worry sometimes too much☺ They are interested how we are doing. They are responsive – they try to predict possible issues and find solutions. Fast communication. They keep their promises and deadlines."

4.2 Effectiveness of Programme procedures

The Programme activities can be roughly divided into two stages: application phase and implementation of projects. Application for the EE-RU CBC Programme grant can be submitted either through open call for standard projects or apply for direct award in case of Large Infrastructure Projects (see also Table 2). There were 26 individual projects and 4 LIPs approved at the date of launching the mid-term evaluation on 21.09.2020. All projects involve people-to-

[18] https://www.estoniarussia.eu/documents-for-beneficiary/

people type of activities, when either knowledge or experiences are shared. Also, some projects involve infrastructure component, where buildings or sites are either renovated or constructed. In general, the interviewed beneficiaries understand and accept the Programme procedures, however public procurements and reporting were the most ones mentioned by beneficiaries creating need for additional clarifications.

For applications in open call the two-steps application process has been used. The rationale behind was that it will make application process easier for the applicant when they first submit project summary and once the summary is approved, full applications were submitted. In reality, it extended the application process and made it more efforts requiring for applicants. While beneficiaries appreciated the pre-application consultation phase, where they could test and discuss their project idea, then beneficiaries found the two-stage formal application too long and unproportional regarding their efforts put into the preparation of the application, assessment period and in some case also the grant size. In order to optimise applicants' efforts into developing application, JTS managing their workload and efficient use of time, one-step application process could be considered in the next period. Having said this, the pre-application consultation should definitely stay as it gives potential applicants confidence in preparing their application and supports getting better quality applications for funding.

In overall, Programme procedures are rather effective. It is expected that all Programme indicators will be achieved.

Construction or renovating always requires public procurement, which has to follow the national law, following either Estonian (when the construction or renovation site is located in Estonia) or Russian public procurement laws (when the construction or renovation site is located in Russia). Beneficiaries having previous experiences with public procurements (mainly local municipalities) manage with public procurements easier and quicker, than beneficiaries having limited or no previous experiences. This makes local municipalities also stronger as applicants and project owners as they already have well Established experiences, like procurement, application, project management and communication skills, in any type of public-funded projects. Beneficiaries, having less knowledge on public procurements or project management, purchase it form the market. Beneficiaries appreciate JTS support in addressing their public procurement related queries, which sometimes require involvement of the MA and public procurement specialist. Consultation process will make public procurement procedures longer, but at the same time will avoid later misunderstandings in auditing phase.

"Estonian procurement rules are different from Russia. In Russia upper limits cannot be exceeded, here in Estonia we can."

"It would be helpful if there is a specific date to communicate with a specific project. So I can plan that I can approach my JTS Programme Consultant on a specific project as they are all very busy."

When beneficiaries accept complicated processes in public procurements, then they find project reporting rather time and effort consuming process. While beneficiaries accept the need for reporting, roughly 80% of interviewed beneficiaries found it time consuming. Again, the more experienced beneficiaries found reporting procedures understandable and rational and reporting can be done quicker, while less experienced and newcomers found it very complicated and time consuming. The main issue the beneficiaries are concerned about is

too detailed reporting of costs – they feel unproportionate reporting small costs in very detail. For making the reporting process more user friendly the Programme has introduced some simplifications like lump sum and flat rate. The idea was giving beneficiaries some flexibility in managing their costs. However, interviewees did not have a clear opinion on whether simplification has really made their reporting easier – some interviewed beneficiaries were not aware that there were simplifications introduced, some admitted that there were simplifications introduced, but they were so minor, that they didn't value those sufficiently. There was no clear evidence found why simplifications were not taken on board as expected, but based on interviews it can be observed that introduced simplifications were minor and didn't impact the overall project implementation significantly.

Similarly, even if beneficiaries are allowed to reallocate budget lines between Work Packages, tasks or partners within 15% of the whole budget during project's lifetime, beneficiaries tend to consult with JTS before making any adjustments in the budget. Again, there was no clear reason why beneficiaries do not use the '15% rule', but it may be related to the fact that JTS has to reopen the budget in eMS for any budget reallocation and beneficiaries feel safer in following the rules when they consult with JTS in advance.

The Programme uses electronic Monitoring System (eMS) for reporting. The eMS is primarily meant for reporting and does not offer project management platform. Beneficiaries insert all reporting data into the system, including financial data. Again, more experienced beneficiaries found eMS user friendly and well designed, while less experienced and newcomers found it very complicated and difficult to follow. The main issue in eMS mentioned by beneficiaries was budget reporting, involving:

- They cannot open or download the budget in the Excel format. The eMS budget is one flow, but beneficiaries have their own budget in Excel. Beneficiaries said that earlier the programme had an Excel integrated, but not anymore. Also, when the budget is printed out from eMS, it comes in a weird format.
- When reporting they want to compare current budget with previous budget. They need to open many windows for that, but it happens sometimes that eMS fails and kick them out of the system, which means they need to login again. They would like to have a possibility to navigate between different windows in eMS.
- When reporting the costs, the budget displays by Work Packages (WPs), reporting periods, cost items and beneficiaries, but there is no budget view where they could see how much is spent by every cost item and how much is left for spending. This requires an Excel in parallel in order to see the whole budget. Beneficiaries would appreciate if the system would allow to have an overall overview of the whole budget by WPs, reporting periods, cost items (i.e. personnel costs, services, travel costs etc), beneficiaries spent and to be spent by the end of the project.
- They would like to upload partner's budget directly to eMS, but as it is not supported by the system, they need to insert every budget item by hand. This makes reporting time consuming.

Even when financial reporting has been simplified (i.e. lump-sum costs or flat rate were introduced) no beneficiary really mentioned that. Only when they were asked 'whether introducing lump-sum or flat rate has simplified the reporting' they recognised and appreciated these developments. Other than that, they found the Programme implementation procedures have remained the same.

In overall, beneficiaries find the eMS acceptable for reporting. In order to make eMS more user friendly and efficient for beneficiaries for reporting, some slight adjustments presented above would be appreciated.

"You have to save after every move, the system could save data automatically."

"It was a bit difficult from the beginning, took some time to learn, but now we already submitted the third report."

"It is suggested to fix a deadline not in Friday evening."

"Estonian Research Council (ETAG) has already an electronic system, why not to integrate there. Centre of Environmental Investments (KIK) also has their own. Is there a point in investing public funds into these systems, but maybe to integrate somehow or make them comparable."

"When entering data, too many clicks have to be made – it is distractive."

"eMS is not user-friendly system. It is not flexible. Auditor does not find information in the system. eMS does not show the history of reporting. Displays are not efficient - it is possible to read emails in three different places in the system, but you can write only in one place."

4.3 Performance of projects and achieving expected results

During the mid-term evaluation projects' output indicators were analysed and compared with Programme output indicators[19]. Output indicators are related to operations supported and are expected to measure what is the direct output of the intervention. Table 5 presents comparison of Programme and projects' indicators for every TO. First projects were contracted in March 2019[20] and the last projects contracted at the moment of writing this mid-term evaluation report will be finalised in September 2020, which makes the average duration of the project 30 months. About 80% of the projects (25 projects) were contracted in 2019 and 20% (5 projects) in 2020. First four projects will be finalised in March – April 2021 (if not be extended) and the last one by the end of December 2022[21][22]. Even if 80% of the projects have been in progress for more than a year, the level of reported project outputs remains modest. It can be explained by low start of projects, providing public procurements, Covid-19 impacts, but also some activities outputs can be measured only at the end of the project (e.g. infrastructure building of renovation). The positive sign is that despite of long project preparation period, all four LIPs and interviewed projects including construction or renovation of physical infrastructure admitted that actual construction works are already finalised or are at the finalisation stage. There was only one project feeling a bit unsecure regarding managing their renovation in

[19] As explained in Chapter 3.2.2 Programme and projects' result indicators are assessed at the end of the Programme. Therefore, only output indicators were assessed.

[20] The Programme was launched in 2018, but due to the long period of ratification of FA first projects were contracted in 2019.

[21] It has to be noted that the mid-term evaluation included all projects contracted at the start date of the evaluation (17.09.2020). Projects contracted later than this date are not included in the evaluation, but will also contribute into achieving Programme indicators.

[22] According to Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2020/879of 23 June 2020 amending the Regulation 897/2014, projects have to be implemented by 31 December 2023 and payments by end of 2024.

Russian territory by the end of the project implementation deadline (they had to procure additional works). However, as public procurement and construction work are still to be done, there may be a risk of delays. Nevertheless, in overall all infrastructure works, normally having higher risks on reaching indicators, will be finalised and indicators achieved. On the side of 'soft activities' including people-to-people activities and knowledge or skills transfer type of activities, all beneficiaries were confident that they would reach their objectives and indicators, but not in the expected quality.

Table 5 Achieving Programme and projects' output indicators

Priority	Output indicator	COI[23]	Programme initial value	Programme target value	Projects' target value	Number of projects' indicators contributing	Projects' reported by 29.10.20	% from projects' target value, 2020
TO1 Business and SME development								
TO1 objectives: • Increasing SME development and entrepreneurship by fostering cross-border business contacts and developing services and products; • Increasing SME competitiveness and entrepreneurship by fostering cooperation between the public, private and R&D; • Improving the business environment through the development of business support measures and infrastructure.								
Increasing SME development and entrepreneurship by fostering cross- border business contacts and developing services and products	Number of enterprises that are substantially and actively involved in projects as final beneficiaries	COI 2	0	80[24]	383	9	24	6%
Increasing SME development and entrepreneurship by fostering cross- border business contacts and developing services and products	Number of improved cultural and historical sites as a direct consequence of programme support	COI 7	0	4	6	3	0	0%
Increasing SME competitiveness and entrepreneurship by fostering cooperation between the public, private and R&D sectors	Number of organisations using programme support for cooperation in education, R&D, and innovation	COI 14	0	6[25]	125	6	8.75	7%
Improving the business environment through the development of business support measures and infrastructure	Number of organisations using programme support for promoting local culture and preserving historical heritage	COI 6	0	15	19	3	0	0%

[23] Common Output Indicators (COI) defined by ENPI: https://tesim-enicbc.eu/download/list-of-common-output-indicators-for-eni-cbc-2014-2020/

[24] The Programme target value is lower than projects' target value because the high interest of enterprises to be actively involved in the projects. Also, all four LIPs are implemented under the TO1 and they are all targeted towards developing business and SME environment.

[25] The Programme target value is lower than projects' target value because the high interest of enterprises to be actively involved in the projects.

Priority	Output indicator	COI	Programme initial value	Programme target value	Projects' target value	Number of projects' indicators contributing	Projects' reported by 29.10.20	% from projects' target value (2020)
TO 5 Support for local & regional good governance								
TO5 objectives: • Improving cooperation between local and regional authorities and their sub-units; Improving cooperation for local and regional communities.								
Improving cooperation between local and regional authorities and their sub-units	The number of participating organisations cooperating across borders for improved governance	COI 14	0	15	21	4	10	48%
Improving cooperation for local and regional communities	The number of participants at events that are aimed at vocational and language training	ERI#	0	200	150[26]	4	93	62%

[26] Projects' target value is lower than Programme target value because it captures only projects granted during 1st and 2nd open call. The 3rd open call was targeted only for TO5 and altogether with projects granted in the result of the 3rd open call the Programme target value will be achieved.

Priority	Output indicator	COI	Programme initial value	Programme target value	Projects' target value	Number of projects' indicators contributing	Projects' reported by 29.10.20	% from projects' target value (2020)
TO 6 Environmental protection, climate change mitigation and adaptationon								
TO 6 objectives: • Improving the quality of shared water assets by reducing their pollution load, including improving waste water treatment facilities, improving solid waste management and relevant facilities (for both household and industrial waste) and reducing the pollution that is caused by the agricultural sector; • Improving the biodiversity of joint natural assets; • Increasing awareness in environmental protection and the efficient use of energy resources; • Fostering shared actions in risk management and a readiness to cope with environmental disasters.								
Improving the quality of shared water assets by means of reducing their pollution load, including improving wastewater treatment facilities, improving solid waste management and relevant facilities (for both household and industrial waste) and reducing the pollution that is caused by the agricultural sector	The number of projects that are related to the purification of common water assets	ERI#	0	6	24	5	4	17%
Improving the biodiversity of joint natural assets	Additional waste recycling capacity (by number of improved facilities)	COI 18	0	2[27]	0	0	0	%
Increasing awareness in environmental protection and the efficient use of energy resources	The number of persons actively participating in environmental actions and awareness-raising activities	ERI#	0	1000	1362	7	829	61%
Fostering shared actions in risk management and a readiness to cope with environmental disasters	Members of the population who benefit from forEE fire protection measures	ERI#	0	20% of Programme area	35	1	0	0%

Source: authors based on eMS data

[27] The only project contributing into reaching the Programme target value was contracted in December 2020 and the project's target value is not indicated in the table. The project's target value is '3', which will reach the Programme target value.

All beneficiaries mentioned negative impact of Covid-19 to their activities, except one project who said that thanks to Covid-19 they had to speed up with their online activities and Covid-19 played them the real need for their activities earlier than expected. The main impact of Covid-19 occurred in cross-border events, where they had to cancel physical gatherings, events, seminars and trainings and provide everything online. All project activities will be done now online, however, the actual cross-border cooperation effect will be lower than expected. Cross border people-to-people communication is a core aim of CBC projects and it does not have the same impact as providing people-to-people contacts online. There is no Covid-19 impact on infrastructure construction or renovating activities evaluated. Since Covid-19 started in March 2020, JTS shared guiding messages to beneficiaries on managing Covid-19 related issues. In overall, these messages were found well-phrased and clear, however, some beneficiaries would have expected more clear messages, especially how to reallocate funds released from travel. The cases of misunderstanding were discussed with JTS and by autumn 2020 it seemed the Covid-19 related issues were solved.

"There were delays in project implementation in spring 2020 but now everyone is already used to Zoom. I think we are in touch more than earlier. Twice a week we have calls with Russian partners."

"Covid-19 impacts 'soft' activities – as the border is closed, we continue our activities via Zoom. All in person events planned for 2019 were provided, but in 2020 we had to move into online. We continue providing in person events on both sides of the border as much as possible and the disseminate online."

"All activities are provided, local people have been trained, but could have not been exchanged knowledge cross-border."

"Covid-19 related restrictions have not impacted well – on Russian side personal contact is very important, trust can be built only based on personal contacts. It cannot be built online. In this respect, it is impossible to create trustful communication environment via online."

Aside Covid-19, there were no other barriers hampering implementation of projects identified during the evaluation. In overall, projects are managed well, risks are under control and implementation goes smoothly. The only speed down aspect is time spent on interpretation of Programme rules, but as this is sufficiently supported by JTS, there are no major barriers observed. Based on projects' applications, reports and interviews with beneficiaries it is expected that project activities will lead to achieving projects' results. Despite of complicated implementation rules described above, the JTS approach of Programme Consultants 'owing' projects, minimises risk of project's failure – Programme Consultants' role is to 'keep hand' of projects and help them in any way to manage any queries and monitor implementation. This allows Programme Consultants to early alert any risks and take mitigation measures. Offering rather heavy workload for JTS Programme Consultants, the 'project ownership' approach nevertheless can be seen an effective way of project management as it may predict any risks in Programme implementation, which may be much more time and resource consuming to manage. Thus, there are no evidence at the moment of providing the mid-term evaluation hampering reaching projects' and Programme indicators, it is expected that all Programme indicators will be achieved by the end of the Programme.

Regarding sustainability of Programme results, it can be concluded that investments made into infrastructure are clearly sustainable in long-run as these are assets in beneficiaries' balance sheets and they have clear owner. This, from one side requires sustainable management of the investment, but also these are either culturally or economically locally important objects. In people-to-people type of projects sustainability of projects' results is difficult to assess as there may be no physical results visible. In many projects the main result is strengthened cooperation between organisations (e.g. schools, museums, local municipalities) across border, which sustainability depends on to what extent these relationships last. From the EE-RU CBC Programme's point of view it is important to continue supporting people-to-people type of activities in order to make these relationships more sustainable.

"We will achieve indicators, but not in the expected quality."

"The problem was that you have to really describe every single indicator. And now every 6 months we have to report on how much we progress on it – difficult to describe."

"We will reach our indicators. However, in some activities we need to reallocate tasks – we need to be creative."

In overall, the Programme is implemented effectively. Despite the complicated Programme procedures and documents, JTS offers sufficient support to beneficiaries. JTS keeps day-to-day contact with beneficiaries and is well aware of their progress or problems mitigating possible risks in reaching the Programme results.

Main conclusions:

- Beneficiaries find the cooperation with MA and JTS very good. Their first contact point is JTS, which collaboration they respect and appreciate the most. They find JTS professional, helpful and always available. Beneficiaries feel they are not alone as JTS is always ready to help them. Beneficiaries have less contacts with MA, but they find cooperation with MA also very good. Beneficiaries find JTS (including. Pskov and St. Petersburg branch offices) support sufficient. They appreciate feeling that JTS really cares about their progress the most.
- Programme procedures are found complicated. Said this, all beneficiaries understand the nature of the Programme and the need for complicated processes. They also appreciate JTS efforts making these processes easier and 'translating' the rules into 'human language'. There was no evidence on major effects from simplifications identified.
- Based on evaluation results it can be concluded that projects' outputs will lead to expected results. No major barriers other than Covid-19 was observed. All people-to-people type of physical contact activities had to be moved online, but it does not affect reaching results or filling projects' indicators. Beneficiaries rather see that while the expected results will be achieved, their quality will be not on the expected level as physical cross-border interaction cannot not be carried out.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

In this chapter main conclusions and recommendations of the mid-term evaluation are given. All findings and conclusions are based on desk research and interviews with beneficiaries and Programme authorities collected during the evaluation. Main findings and detailed recommendations are presented in Table 6.

In overall, the mid-term evaluation of EE-RU CBC Programme finds the Programme efficient and effective. In the EU context the Programme is implemented under the European Neighbourhood Instrument, which sets the overall objective and framework. The nature of the Programme – there are three counterparts involved: the European Commission, the Republic of Estonia and the Russian Federation – depicts the intervention design and implementation processes. Therefore, the programming period, where the main Thematic Objectives are agreed, is rather long as it involves three counterparts and one of them (the Russian Federation) performing in different legal environment making the Programme implementation rather complicated. Therefore, the strategic approach is defined on higher level than the body responsible for implementing the Programme (the Managing Authority) leaving quick adjustments possible only in implementation details.

In overall, the evaluation finds the Programme intervention design and processes rather appropriate and optimal in given strategic framework. Complexity of the Programme requires detailed Programme documents and guidelines, but on the other side offers room for interpretation of terms and conditions. Similarly, the Programme implementation processes are seen complicated and project implementation is highly supervised by JTS. For supporting beneficiaries and securing reaching the Programme objectives, the latter is very much necessary and appreciated in the current Programme set up, however, putting JTS under heavy workload.

There was no evidence collected showing that the Programme indicators would not be reached. The only real barrier identified was Covid-19, which has significantly affected implementation of project activities. However, as it is the interest of beneficiaries to have projects' results, they have been creative and found solutions on providing their activities in a different way. Mostly people-to-people type of activities were affected by Covid-19 and they had to move online, while Covid-19 has had almost no impact on infrastructure investments. Also, JTS is not only monitoring the progress of projects, but they provide a day-to-day support to projects, making them secure and not left alone. Therefore, even if a number of projects have asked extension of project deadline, there is enough confidence that all project activities will be implemented and Programme indicators achieved. There are no evidence indicating any major threats on achieving results and filling indicators at a time of drafting the mid-term evaluation report. Also, there were no major threats found on sustainability of the Programme results observed. Beneficiaries are mostly well-established organisations with sufficient skills and knowledge to continue maintaining and developing EE-RU CBC projects' results. It is recommended that JTS would make sure newcomers or beneficiaries having less experiences with CBC programmes are sufficiently supported in order to give them confidence in following Programme rules.

The mid-term evaluation observes limited opportunities improving the Programme strategic approach as it depends the most from the EU and the participating cross-border countries', the Republic of Estonia and the Russian Federation, political and legal environment. However, it is very much expected that the next Programme would be agreed in shorter period than six years, two-three years would be optimal for developing and agreeing the Programme strategic approach.

For the next period of the EE-RU CBC Programme 2021-2027 beneficiaries' expectations were collected. Expectations presented by a larger number of beneficiaries were incorporated into recommendations and expectations presented by a small number of beneficiaries are presented below. As these expectations represent only small number of beneficiaries, they are presented not as recommendations, but rather as feedback and expectations towards the EE-RU CBC programme 2021-2027.

Beneficiaries expectations towards Programme 2021-2027:

- Cultural heritage objectives should include not only feasibility studies and research projects but also investment plans and investment activities, including joint activities with business. Innovation ideas should be supported.
- The investment need for environment and sustainable development type of projects is high, especially on the Russian side of the border. Environment targeted projects have to remain in the focus of the Programme.
- Expected types of eligible activities:
    - Investments into access to cultural sites;
    - Choir and similar types of festivals (people-to-people activities);
    - Involving universities and research-related activities/partnerships into projects;
    - Tourism related activities – tourism is important industry for border regions.
- Investments into local infrastructure is very much needed. It will help improving local living conditions in both sides of the border and offer good opportunity for Programme visibility among local population and tourists.
- The Programme is expected to be simpler (mainly shorter project application assessment process, more flexibility in interpretation of Programme rules and simplified reporting in eMS). Projects should have much more focus on expected results – projects should be evaluated towards their activities and expected results as these indicate potential impact. other.
- Reporting workload has to be minimised – the aim is to implement the project and get results and not convince JTS too frequently what has been done in the project.
- It is expected that when an application is submitted, the applicant does not have to know every detail of the project – it should be acceptable presenting the idea and main resources available for the project. It is expected that the Programme bureaucracy would not hamper the creativity of applicants. Also, in case of projects having innovative component it has to be acceptable, if the innovation will not work.

The main recommendations for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the EE-RU CBC Programme 2014-2020 and suggestions for the next EE-RU CBC Programme 2021-2027 are presented in boxes below.

There are some short-term improvements could be introduced for simplifying implementation of the 2014-2020 Programme:

1. The communication of the Programme should be significantly strengthened as often even Russian-speaking media in Estonia are not aware of the cooperation and projects going on. The wider communication should go beyond project-based communication but target wider local/regional/national groups. JTS is expected to further promote activities at the local level, for which the EE-RU CBC is effective.
2. It is recommended to provide translation to documents for beneficiaries making implementation rules clearer for beneficiaries. It would be the JTS responsibility to update the documents when changes are made. Working out appropriate and common Programme definitions in Russian (rate than ad hoc and situational) will benefit all parties.
3. For making some Programme processes (i.e. communication and reporting) more easily understandable it is recommended visualising (using graphics or video clips) them.
4. It is recommended keeping the JTS strong role in monitoring of implementation of the projects and JTS keep supporting beneficiaries on day-to-day basis. Continue with the process of giving more responsibilities to branch offices in Pskov and St. Petersburg.
5. Introducing slight adjustments in eMS making projects' reporting more comfortable and less time consuming.

The most important recommendations for the Programme 2021-2027 include:

1. It is recommended keeping Programme target area on border regions. The Programme funds are limited and in order to have impact, investments have to be focussed.
2. It is recommended continuing investments into border regions' local public infrastructure, especially in the areas of culture, tourism and environment. The demand for investments is high in these areas especially on Russian side as well as these are the main connecting areas of the border regions.
3. Consider enlarging thematic objectives by including research activities – both parties, Programme authorities and beneficiaries, expressed such interest and both parties emphasised the need to promote cooperation between universities.
4. It is recommended applying indicators measuring rather impact than output. Consider further aligning project related indicators with the concrete needs of the given region – in larger countries such as Russia, regions vary greatly. Also, it will support assessing the actual shift of intervention in the region.

Table 6 Main findings and recommendations of the mid-term evaluation

Purpose of the evaluation	Main findings and conclusions	Recommendations
Efficiency of the Programme	The EE-RU CBC programme is very much appreciated by all beneficiaries and Programme authorities. They find the Programme relevant and necessary contributing into socio-economic and regional development of cross-border areas. Also, both hard investments and people-to-people type of projects are very welcome as they help strengthen cooperation between people and authorities from both sides of the border. The EE-RU CBC Programme is much appreciated by Russian partners. They find it easier, clearer and more convenient than other programmes. Programme output and result indicators are adequately established. Programme is mainly disseminated through the Programme authorities', the Programme and beneficiaries' homepages and social media accounts. The Programme is less known and recognised by wider population in Estonia or border regions in Russia.	To keep the current composition of Programme authorities due to their high competence, accumulated experience in project implementation, acquired anti-crisis management skills and a high degree of satisfaction of project beneficiaries with interaction with Programme authorities. In order to make the process of adjusting the Programme documents faster, it is recommended to manage adjustments as the need is identified and not collecting several adjustments for providing them in one slot. It will make the Programme implementation smoother and increase effectiveness. The communication of the Programme should be significantly strengthened as often even Russian-speaking media in Estonia are not aware of the cooperation and projects going on. The wider communication should go beyond project-based communication but target wider local/regional/national groups. This has a direct contribution to awareness, images of cooperation activities and to the future project application rates. Programme awareness can be increased through local municipalities' homepages and social media on both sides of the border, local organisations related to tourism and economic development, but also on Enterprise Estonia, as entrepreneurship organisation offering public support to tourism and enterprises, media channels.

		Dissemination needs to be targeted in three languages – English, Estonian and Russian. Further promote activities at the local level, for which the EE-RU CBC is effective. A lot can be done at the local level while agreements at the national level can take longer. EE-RU CBC provides all the necessary resources and *modus operandi* to such local activities where multiple stakeholders can be mobilised and participate freely (e.g. environmental projects that involve research and educational activities, local municipalities and citizens). It is recommended considering rephrasing result indicators of TO1 and TO5 (if possible in the current stage of Programme implementation) in order to measure the expected change of the intervention. Rephrasing should include the desired change to be happen, like "*Increase in smth*".
	The intervention logic of the Programme is mainly well understood and clear. Both beneficiaries and Programme authorities understand the rationale behind the complexity of the CBC Programmes in general. However, the Programme procedures and documents are rather complicated for beneficiaries. Especially for newcomers and SMEs. There is clear division of beneficiaries who find the Programme procedures and documents rather clear (experienced beneficiaries) and the ones, who find it very difficult to understand and follow (newcomers in the Programme). There are many issues beneficiaries need to clarify and ask JTS help for interpretation of rules. When Estonian partners find the Programme implementation rules complicated (comparing to other	The implementation processes have to be made simpler: • It is recommended to provide translation to documents for beneficiaries making implementation rules clearer for beneficiaries. It would be the JTS responsibility to update the documents when changes are made. Working out appropriate and common Programme definitions in Russian (rate than ad hoc and situational) will benefit all parties. • In the framework of JOP, making interpretation of Programme documents more flexible and taking more into account project's specificities as much as possible. As there have been many issues with interpreting the Communication and Visibility Guidelines, it is recommended to consider

	EU funding programmes), then Russian partners are used to bureaucratic system and accept the complicated rules easier, but still would appreciate further simplification of the processes. SMEs find the EE-RU programme especially complicated, which is the main reason there are few SMEs participating in the Programme. There are only some SMEs as partners or associated partners. All beneficiaries accept that the Programme official language is English. However, when it comes to beneficiaries not speaking English sufficiently for understanding the Programme documents, it requires extra efforts from the project manager to translate and explain the rules for project partners. It significantly reduces project's efficiency. The language issue is particularly present at the local/regional level - the main target group of the EE-RU CBC programme.	providing good examples how to use Programme and project logos in social media. • For making some Programme processes (i.e. communication and reporting) more easily understandable it is recommended continue visualising (using graphics or video clips) them. As an example, application process and eMS reporting process are the ones requiring the most efforts by applicants/beneficiaries and can be made more easily understandable with visualisation of the process step by step. • Consider providing examples of pre-filled reporting documents as a learning material. • Create a base of the best practices that will enable program participants to make rational decisions based on historical experience.
	JTS is well Established and functions well. All beneficiaries are satisfied with the JTS work – they are available, helpful and committed. JTS branch offices are very much appreciated, However, it can be concluded that JTS and its branch offices are overloaded – as more projects to be implemented as more resources JTS would need to support and monitor projects' implementation. Empowering branch offices in Russia by authorising JTS-type of functions is very welcome. This will significantly improve the 'translation' of rules and practices between the parties. This is crucial for mutual learning and further increasing the number of partners/leads from the Russian regions. The foundations for this change are in place: the staff of branch offices often perform these functions de facto and have been	JTS keep supporting beneficiaries on day-to-day basis. It is recommended that JTS would make sure newcomers and beneficiaries having less experiences with CBC programmes are sufficiently supported in order to give them confidence in following Programme rules. Continue with the process of giving more responsibilities to branch offices in Pskov and St. Petersburg. Consider increasing the number of consultation hours organised centrally, e.g. by JTS. Related to this, face-to-face meetings are the most effective for all parties involved. Such consultations/seminars are particularly useful for getting to know the details of implementation and reporting, particularly from other projects.

	described by project beneficiaries as competent and effective.	In order to maintain efficiency of JTS branch offices, it is recommended to consider strengthening branch offices' human resources. As a palliative measure, JTS may want to consider involving senior students of universities for internship performing certain tasks within the framework of the Programme.
Effectiveness of the Programme	The Electronic Monitoring System (eMS) in overall is user friendly and comfortable to use, especially for beneficiaries used to work with the system. However, it is complicated for new users, but it can be concluded that new users would normally also adjust with the system quickly. There is one section in reporting – budgeting – which could be improved in order to make it more user friendly and easier to navigate.	For making the eMS more efficient it is recommended to consider: • Increasing the number of functions to work with financial data – e.g. to monitor financial activity for each beneficiary; • Introducing auto-fill of repeating questions in reports; • Introducing auto-saving after every data entry; • Recording a video as a user manual for eMS and reporting; • Increasing the number of hours of interactive practical lessons on working in eMS; • Enabling opening or downloading the budget in the Excel format; • Comparing previous reported budget with current reporting period budget in one window (or giving the possibility to navigate between different windows in eMS without opening many windows at the same time); • Enabling having an overall overview of the whole budget by WPs, reporting periods, cost items (i.e. personnel costs, services, travel costs etc), beneficiaries spent and to be spent by the end of the project.

	It can be confirmed that projects' output indicators will be achieved. There was no other major obstacle in reaching objectives and fulfilling indicators other that Covid-19 identified. Covid-19 impact on indicators is the highest on people-to-people type of activities, where physical events cannot be organised. The physical events are provided online, however, it can be observed that the quality of the results will most probably be lower than expected. Covid-19 impact is the lowest on infrastructure investments, where physical objects have to be built. Public procurements for constructions are provided by experienced beneficiaries (public authorities) and no major issues, which would impact project's results, were identified. Aside Covid-19, there were no other barriers hampering implementation of projects identified during the evaluation. Changes in projects' implementation are mainly made due to the Covid-19 as all in person events have to be redrafted online. In some cases, its causes reallocation of funds between budget lines (e.g. released travel costs to be reallocated to other activities), adding, adjusting, expanding or rescheduling activities. It can be concluded that no harm on meeting the end deadline of 31 December 2022 by projects was detected. JTS role in monitoring cannot be underestimated. One reason why EE-RU CBC projects are well in schedule is because of thorough monitoring and support by JTS – they know their clients very well.	It is recommended to keep the JTS strong role in monitoring the implementation of the projects. It will help keeping the projects in schedule and mitigate any possible risks. Also, JTS day-to-day support is much appreciated in the environment of complicated implementation rules.

EE-RU CBC Programme 2021-2027	The EE-RU CBC Programme is well appreciated by target groups and therefore is very much expected to be continued also during 2021-2027. However, beneficiaries expect the Programme to be less complicated and processes to be quicker to implement. Also, Programme documents are expected to be less complicated and made clearer. In the area of environmental protection and local public infrastructure (e.g. cultural heritage, small harbours, access to tourism objects) the need for investments is especially high in the Russian side of the border.	**Recommended improvement in Programme objectives and intervention design:** It is recommended keeping Programme target area on border regions. The Programme funds are limited and in order to have any impact, investments have to be focussed. It is recommended to progress with the new JOP within 2-3 years in order to minimize the time gap between the current Programme and the new one. It will allow smooth continuation of developing the Programme area and maintain the acquired international business contacts and professional interest in the Programme and the beneficiaries' initiative. Among other thematic objectives, it is recommended continuing investments into border regions' local public infrastructure, especially in the areas of culture, tourism and environment. The demand for investments is high in these areas especially on Russian side as well as these are the main connecting areas of the border regions. It is recommended to include municipal level authorities in St. Petersburg as beneficiaries in the Programme. This is due to the peculiarities of the organisation of municipal administration in St. Petersburg, which limits the ability of municipalities to obtain financial resources due to extremely limited taxation. At the same time, being the closest government bodies in relation to the local population, the municipal authorities in St. Petersburg could become effective participants of the Program in terms of projects related to the improvement of the territory for social support of certain categories of local residents, social, cultural and recreational activities of the population. Consider enlarging thematic objectives by including research activities – both parties expressed such interests

		and both parties emphasised the need to promote cooperation between universities. Another potential TO – learning languages (Estonian and Russian) and Russian beneficiaries expressed such an interest. In terms of overall intervention of the programme, consider enlarging the long-term orientation and sustainable development objective. Consider involving local universities into development of the next Programme. They can play an important role. It is absolutely crucial to exchange knowledge and facilitate the cross-border flow thereof. Consider strengthening involvement of local authorities, especially on the Russian side of the border, in the process of drafting the programming documents for 2021-2027. It will give them better understanding about the Programme and opportunities it brings to the local community. It will encourage them to benefit from the Programme as beneficiaries as well as they can better motivate other potential local organisations participating in the Programme. It is recommended phrasing result indicators measuring impact. Consider further aligning project related indicators with the concrete needs of the given region – in larger countries such as Russia, regions vary greatly. Also, it will support assessing the actual shift of intervention in the region. **The project application and implementation processes have to be made more simple:** Keep the standard projects and LIP approach. This will enable focussing on smaller local issues, funding people-to-people activities as well as solving larger and more complex issues.

		Provide call for proposals in one step process, the 2-step application process is unproportional regarding efforts made for proposal preparation and the size of the grant. In one-stage application process, look for possibility requesting less supporting documents – JTS may want to consider applying similar rules to Estonian public procurement law, when the applicant will present selected supporting documents after having preliminary positive evaluation result. It will reduce applicant's workload in application process and makes it easier for applicant. However, the list of required supporting documents have to be known in application phase so that the applicant would be ready to present the document upon request. LIP proposals can be continued providing as 2-step process as these are large infrastructure projects involving large financial investments. Fasten the application evaluation period to 2 or 3 months making the Programme more efficient. If needed, consider involving more field experts to evaluate proposals. It will increase Programme attractiveness for newcomers and SMEs and give a signal to applicants that the Programme operates fast. Before opening 2021-2027 open calls, consider strengthening beneficiaries' capacity to prepare better applications. This can take place in form of seminars and would involve possible beneficiaries and partners particularly from the Russian side of the border. It is recommended to split the Grant Contract into Specific and General Conditions for making it more user-friendly. The Specific Conditions should capture project specific information like the name of the project, names of beneficiaries, grant amount and contact details being

		very short and explicit, while General Conditions involve all Programme implementation related information. JTS may consider increasing the number of Programme Consultants both at the application stage and during the project implementation. By balancing JTS workload it will support faster management if projects and applying flexible forms of management.

Source: authors

Appendix A List of projects involved in the mid-term evaluation

Thematic objective	Project code	Project name	Regions involved	Direct award or open call	Interviewed organisations
TO1	ER24	Development of measures for improving the quality of diagnosis and prevention of type 2 diabetes	South Estonia Pskov region St.Petersburg	Open call	Federal State Budgetary Educational Institution of Higher Education "Saint-Petersburg State University" (RU)
	ER1	Improvement of the Accessibility of the Remote Areas in South East Estonia and Pskov Region for Traditional Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development	North Estonia Pskov region South Estonia	Direct award	Setomaa Municipality Government (EE)
	ER4	Development of historical riverside protection area in Narva/Estonia and Ivangorod/Russia III stage	Leningrad region Northeast Estonia	Direct award	Narva City Government, Department for City Development and Economy (EE)
	ER3	Development of the unique Narva-Ivangorod trans-border fortresses ensemble as a single cultural and tourist object. 2nd stage	St.Petersburg Northeast Estonia	Direct award	Foundation Narva Museum (EE)
	ER48	Extending, strengthening the network and smart marketing of Via Hanseatica	Northeast Estonia St.Petersburg Leningrad region Pskov region Central Estonia	Open call	Foundation Tartu County Tourism (EE)
	ER30	Novel lignin-based plastics for sustainable polymer industry	St.Petersburg South Estonia	Open call	University of Tartu (EE)
	ER89	New Technologies and Innovation in Theatre	St. Petersburg North Estonia	Open call	SA Vaba Lava (EE)
	ER45	Promoting marketing of local products and services	Leningrad region Northeast Estonia	Open call	Administration of Municipal Formation Slantsy Municipal District of Leningrad region
	ER85	Entrepreneurial-minded youth – growth potential for border region	Leningrad region Northeast Estonia	Open call	Not interviewed
	ER53	Narva and Slantsy riverside areas development for	Leningrad region	Open call	Not interviewed

		business and visiting environment improvement	Northeast Estonia		
	ER91	Entrepreneurship programme for upper-secondary students "EERU-preneurs"	St. Petersburg Northeast Estonia	Open call	Not interviewed
	ER94	Improving competitiveness of rural SME's by teaching innovative eco-technologies and farming practices, fostering cross-border contacts and creation of infrastructure adding value to the farm products	South Estonia Pskov region	Open call	Not interviewed
	ER58	Increasing entrepreneurial culture and competitiveness among artisans and craftsmen in Võru and Pskov	Pskov region South Estonia	Open call	Not interviewed
TO5	ER52	Improving cooperation between local authorities, schools and NGO's in teaching and promotion of local cultural heritage to children and youngsters in historical Setomaa area	South Estonia Pskov region	Open call	The Union of Setomaa (EE)
	ER78	Promoting healthy lifestyles	South Estonia Pskov region	Open call	Setomaa Municipality Government (EE)
	ER8	Improved network of formal and informal education institutes to support Cultural and Natural Heritage of the Lake Peipsi/Chudskoe-Pskovskoe region	South Estonia Pskov region	Open call	Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation (EE)
	ER96	Promoting music hobby education and fostering cross border cooperation between the music schools in Pskov and Räpina	South Estonia Pskov region	Open call	Children's Music School № 1 named N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov
	ER19	From family to society	Pskov region Northeast Estonia	Open call	Not interviewed
	ER153	Cooperation of professional and local communities to improve quality of healthcare services, rehabilitation and social inclusion in border areas of Estonia and Russia	Pskov Region South Estonia	Open call	Not interviewed
TO6	ER2	Economically and Environmentally Sustainable Lake Peipsi area 2	South Estonia Northeast Estonia Pskov region	Direct award	Setomaa Municipality Government (EE)

	ER54	Improving the quality of shared water assets in EE-RU border area	Northeast Estonia Pskov region	Open call	Municipal enterprise for the operation of systems of water supply and sanitation "Vodokanal" Velikie Luki (RU)
	ER29	Improving the quality of shared assets by reducing their pollution load from utility sewer systems of towns and rural areas in the programme territory (Pskov area and south Estonia)	South Estonia Pskov region	Open call	Municipal enterprise of the Pskov city "Gorvodokanal" (RU)
	ER101	Raising Environmental Awareness in Estonian-Russian Border Area	South Estonia Pskov region	Open call	Pskov regional public organization «Lake Peipsi Project (Pskov)» (RU)
	ER126	Joint actions for improving local rescue fire services to protect forests and settlements in EE-RU border area	Pskov region Northeast Estonia	Open call	Administration of the Pskovskiy area (RU)
	ER25	Water Management of the Narva River: harmonization and sustention	St.Petersburg North Estonia	Open call	Tallinn University of Technology (EE)
	ER15	Improvement of housing energy performance level of public buildings through introducing innovative technologies and solutions in Estonia and Pskov region	South Estonia Pskov region	Open call	Tartu Regional Energy Agency (EE)
	ER55	Increasing capacity of environmental protection to maintain biodiversity and ecosystem performance in the Gulf of Finland under multiple human uses and climate change pressure	St.Petersburg North Estonia South Estonia	Open call	Committee for Nature Use, Environmental Protection and Ecological Safety of the City of St. Petersburg
	ER80	Restocking of European eel as a measure of endangered species recovery and preservation of natural diversity	St.Petersburg Central Estonia	Open call	Not interviewed
	ER90	Hazardous chemicals in the eastern Gulf of Finland – concentrations and impact assessment	St.Petersburg North Estonia	Open call	Not interviewed
	ER65	Improving biodiversity and increasing awareness of environmental protection in regional centres in Estonian-Russian border area	South Estonia Pskov region	Open call	Not interviewed

Appendix B Interview guides

B.1. Beneficiary interview guide

Thematic topic	Evaluation questions	Interview questions with beneficiaries
Thematic topic 1: Efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation of the Programme on both, the Programme, and project level.	To analyse whether the output and result indicators of the Programme are adequately established?	• In your opinion were the output and result indicators of the Programme relevant to the needs of you and other project beneficiaries? • Was it easy or difficult to align your project to achieve the results and outputs of the Programme? • Were there problems with specific indicators (i.e. hard to interpret, apply to your context, etc.)?
	Do the performance and responsibilities of the Programme authorities ensure the effective and efficient implementation of the Programme? Should anything be changed?	• Which of the Programme authorities were you in contact with during your project? • When considering your communication with them, were Programme authorities able to provide clear information, guidance and support in project application, implementation and reporting phases? • Were there any issues in your communication with the Programme authorities? • What improvements would you like to see to how Programme authorities communicate and support projects?
	Does the framework as defined by the Programme allow the project beneficiaries to implement their projects in the most efficient way? What are the obstacles? How can the implementation be improved?	• Have you experienced any difficulties in project implementation due to the programme requirements or logic? If so, please describe them in detail. • What should be changed/improved in the programme framework and/or procedures to make project implementation easier?
	Which obstacles have the beneficiaries experienced in the implementation of the project due to COVID-19 outbreak and how were these obstacles addressed? Have the Programme measures as regards addressing the problems caused by COVID-19 been adequate and helpful?	• What changes to the implementation of project did the outbreak of Covid-19 cause? • What measures did you or other project beneficiaries take to address this change? • Have the programme measures in addressing the outbreak been adequate and helpful? What more could have been done and what is expected in the nearEE future? • Will the outbreak have an impact on ability to deliver project results?
	How do the project beneficiaries assess the Programme documents? Are the documents understandable and easy or difficult to follow? How can the documents be improved?	• Do you find programme documents helpful in preparation and implementation of the project? • Can you easily understand the contents of the documents and use them for your work? • How can the documents be improved?
	How do the project beneficiaries assess the established procedures including the electronic monitoring system, and simplification of them? Has simplification applied so far helped to save the resources?	• How do you assess the functioning of programme Electronic Monitoring System (eMS)? Is it user friendly? Have you encountered any issues with the eMS hampering your work? Have they been systematic or temporary type of issues? How have you overcome these?

Thematic topic	Evaluation questions	Interview questions with beneficiaries
	How can the Programme simplify further?	• Have you noticed and how do you assess the simplification of the system? Has this helped you save time, resources? • How can the system further be simplified or made more user-friendly? Please refer to specific functions of the system.
	What is the project beneficiaries' experience regarding cooperation with the MA and the JTS including St. Petersburg and Pskov offices? Is the provided support, by whatever means, sufficient? What are the beneficiaries most satisfied with and what needs to be improved?	• What is you experience regarding cooperation with the MA and JTS? Please describe the nature of your cooperation? • Has working with the MA and JTS been helpful to you and project beneficiaries? What went well with the cooperation? • What could be improved (e.g. time to respond, quality of feedback, accessibility, etc.)
Thematic topic 2: The ability for selected and contracted projects to achieve results and their capacity to contribute towards the achievement of the objectives of the Programme.	Whether the outputs lead to the achievement of the results?	• What are the defined/expected results of the project? • What are the key outputs of the project so far? • Do you think you will be able to achieve the results?
	What are the obstacles and facilitating factors in the implementation of the projects and achievement of results?	• When thinking about your planned results, what factors were particularly helpful for the implementation of the projects and achievement of results (i.e. good partnership, well defined project activities and outputs)? • In your opinions, what are the obstacles that are preventing or would prevent you from achieving the planned results? • How could these obstacles be mitigated? Are there steps that the Programme authorities could take to help you?
	What has changed due to the programme interventions, i.e. what positive effect can be identified in the beneficiaries and areas supported by the programme?	• Have you made any change in the areas supported by the programme with the help of your project? *Depending on TO change can be increased competitiveness, reduced environmental concerns, improved infrastructure, etc. • What has changed in your or other organisations involved in the project due to the Programme? • What changes are still expected to come? • Are there specific obstacles preventing change to occur?
Thematic topic 3: Recommendations for Programme improvement based on the evaluation results and input for the Estonia-Russia CBC Programme 2021-2027.	Based on the current implementation phase and situation of the beneficiaries, will the project results be sustainable and beneficial for project beneficiaries, the Programme area and possibly beyond it? Is there an evidence that necessary human and financial resources will be ensured to maintain the project results after the project end?	• Will the project results be sustainable and have lasting impact after the completion of the project? • How it will affect you organisation, other project beneficiaries and the Programme area? • Will you sustain human and/or financial resources to maintain the project results? If so, to what extent? If not, how will you (or other institutions) ensure sustainability of project results?

Thematic topic	Evaluation questions	Interview questions with beneficiaries
	What improvements are necessary in the procedures and implementation of the programme in the period 2021-2027?	• Looking towards the new EE-RU CBC programme for 2021-2027, what do you think are the changes that have to be made to ensure smooth and effective implementation of the programme? • What kind of programme would be attractive for you and the objectives you are trying to achieve?

B.2. Programme authority interview guide

Thematic topic	Evaluation questions	Interview questions with Programme authorities
Thematic topic 1: Efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation of the Programme on both, the Programme, and project level.	Is the intervention design of the Programme coherent? Whether and how can it be improved?	• What is your perception of the appropriateness of the Joint Operational Programme logic and its potential to reach programme objectives? • Based on your experience (especially working with beneficiaries) how would you improve the programme intervention logic?
	To analyse whether the output and result indicators of the Programme are adequately established?	• Do the programme output and result indicators capture the actual results and outputs of the supported projects? • Are there indicators that are being achieved particularly well? Why? • Are there indicators that cause concerns whether they will be achieved? What are the reasons for these concerns? • Are there problems with specific indicators (i.e. hard to interpret, apply)? • How would you improve the programme output and result indicators?
	Do the performance and responsibilities of the Programme authorities ensure the effective and efficient implementation of the Programme? Should anything be changed?	• When considering your role in the programme, are you able to fulfil your responsibilities efficiently? • What factors, actions, etc. are particularly helpful in allowing you to fulfil your responsibilities efficiently? • To what extent the Electronic Monitoring System (eMS) meets your needs to manage the Programme effectively? Have you encountered any issues with the eMS hampering your work? Have they been systematic or temporary type of issues? How have you overcome these? Do you plan any improvements into the system? Which ones and why? What problem these improvements do you expect to address? • What are the obstacles that hinder your ability to fulfil your responsibilities efficiently? • How do you perceive the collaboration between JMC, MA, JTS and NA (including between the Russian and Estonian sides internally and internationally)? Do you think the programme authorities collaborate sufficiently? Are the information flows smooth enough? To what extent the task distribution between programme authorities is clear? Are there any systemic, programme related or personal level obstacles in the programme implementation detected? Please describe and give examples.

Thematic topic	Evaluation questions	Interview questions with Programme authorities
		• What would be your suggestions on how to adjust the distribution of responsibilities to increase the efficiency of the Programme management?
	Are the financial and human resources foreseen for the management of the Programme sufficient and used in the most efficient way?	• Based on your experience, was there a lack of financial or human resources to deliver on your responsibilities at the highest standard? If so, what impact has it made? • Is there a need for extra financial and human resources and why?
	Which obstacles have the beneficiaries experienced in the implementation of the project due to COVID-19 outbreak and how were these obstacles addressed? Have the Programme measures as regards addressing the problems caused by COVID-19 been adequate and helpful?	• Have you observed any impacts of Covid-19 epidemic on beneficiaries and what impact it has had on your work? • In your opinion, has the Programme taken sufficient measures to addressing the problems caused by COVID-19?
Thematic topic 3: Recommendations for Programme improvement based on the evaluation results and input for the Estonia-Russia CBC Programme 2021-2027.	What improvements are necessary in the regulation and implementation of the programme in the period 2021-2027?	• Looking towards the new EE-RU CBC programme for 2021-2027, what do you think are the changes that have to be made to ensure smooth and effective implementation of the programme?

Appendix C List of interviews provided during the evaluation

Interviewed beneficiaries

TO	Project code	Project	Direct award or open call	Interviewed beneficiary	Interview date
TO1	ER24	Development of measures for improving the quality of diagnosis and prevention of type 2 diabetes	Open call	Federal State Budgetary Educational Institution of Higher Education "Saint-Petersburg State University" (RU)	26.11.20
	ER1	Improvement of the Accessibility of the Remote Areas in South East Estonia and Pskov Region for Traditional Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development	Direct award	Setomaa Municipality Government (EE)	19.11.20
	ER4	Development of historical riverside protection area in Narva/Estonia and Ivangorod/Russia III stage	Direct award	Narva City Government, Department for City Development and Economy (EE)	09.11.20
	ER3	Development of the unique Narva-Ivangorod trans-border fortresses ensemble as a single cultural and tourist object. 2nd stage	Direct award	Foundation Narva Museum (EE)	11.12.20
	ER48	Extending, strengthening the network and smart marketing of Via Hanseatica	Open call	Foundation Tartu County Tourism (EE)	02.12.20
	ER30	Novel lignin-based plastics for sustainable polymer industry	Open call	University of Tartu (EE)	09.11.20
	ER89	New Technologies and Innovation in Theatre	Open call	SA Vaba Lava (EE)	23.11.20
	ER45	Promoting marketing of local products and services	Open call	Kohtla-Järve Town Government (EE)	19.11.20
TO5	ER52	Improving cooperation between local authorities, schools and NGO's in teaching and promotion of local cultural heritage to children and youngsters in historical Setomaa area	Open call	The Union of Setomaa (EE)	16.11.20
	ER78	Promoting healthy lifestyles	Open call	Setomaa Municipality Government (EE)	18.11.20
	ER8	Improved network of formal and informal education institutes to support Cultural and Natural	Open call	Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation (EE)	09.11.20

		Heritage of the Lake Peipsi/Chudskoe-Pskovskoe region			
	ER96	Promoting music hobby education and fostering cross border cooperation between the music schools in Pskov and Räpina	Open call	Children's Music School No 1 Named N.A. Rimsky-Korsakov (RU)	11.11.20
TO6	ER2	Economically and Environmentally Sustainable Lake Peipsi area 2	Direct award	Setomaa Municipality Government (EE)	19.11.20
	ER54	Improving the quality of shared water assets in EE-RU border area	Open call	Municipal enterprise for the operation of systems of water supply and sanitation "Vodokanal" Velikie Luki (RU)	24.11.20
	ER29	Improving the quality of shared assets by reducing their pollution load from utility sewer systems of towns and rural areas in the programme territory (Pskov area and south Estonia)	Open call	Municipal enterprise of the Pskov city "Gorvodokanal" (RU)	19.11.20
	ER101	Raising Environmental Awareness in Estonian-Russian Border Area	Open call	Pskov regional public organization «Lake Peipsi Project (Pskov)» (RU)	11.01.21
	ER126	Joint actions for improving local rescue fire services to protect forests and settlements in EE-RU border area	Open call	Administration of the Pskovskiy area (RU)	15.11.20
	ER25	Water Management of the Narva River: harmonization and sustention	Open call	Tallinn University of Technology (EE)	27.11.20
	ER15	Improvement of housing energy performance level of public buildings through introducing innovative technologies and solutions in Estonia and Pskov region	Open call	Tartu Regional Energy Agency (EE)	06.11.20
	ER55	Increasing capacity of environmental protection to maintain biodiversity and ecosystem performance in the Gulf of Finland under multiple human uses and climate change pressure	Open call	Federal State Budget Institution of Science (RU)	11.12.20

Interviewed Programme authorities

Authority	Region	Organisation	Interview date
Joint Monitoring Committee	St. Petersburg	Committee for External Relations of St. Petersburg	08.12.20
	Leningrad Region	Committee for External Relations of Leningrad Region	10.12.20
	Pskov	State Pskov region Committee for Economic Development and Investment Policy	23.11.20
	Russia	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	03.12.20
	Estonia	Ministry of Culture	24.11.20
	Estonia	Foundation Võru County Development Agency	09.11.20
	Estonia	Association of Local Municipalities of Lääne-Viru County	09.11.20
Managing Authority	Estonia	Head of the Managing Authority	05.11.20
	Estonia	Programme Expert	05.11.20
	Estonia	Programme Expert	05.11.20
Joint Technical Secretariat	Estonia	Head of the JTS	30.10.20
	Estonia	2 Programme Consultants and 1 Programme and Communication Consultant	30.10.20
	Estonia	eMS administrator	30.10.20
	Pskov	Information Manager at the branch office in Pskov, Russia	16.11.20
	St. Petersburg	Information Manager at the branch office in St. Petersburg responsible for the St, Petersburg city and Leningrad Region	16.11.20
National Authority	Estonia	Ministry of Finance	06.11.20
	Russia	Ministry of Economic Development	20.11.20

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