

Minutes of the 8th Annual Meeting of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021

Date:

6th June 2025

Venue:

Hotel Elizabeth, "Congress Hall B", Trenčín

Agenda:

- 9:00-9:15 Opening remarks
- 9:15-9:45 Progress under the programmes and closure status
- 9:45-10:15 Bilateral cooperation
- 10:15-10:30 Conclusions and closing remarks

Opening Remarks

The National Focal Point (NFP) welcomed participants and expressed the gratitude to open the Annual Meeting right after the conference that marked both the end of the 3rd programming period and the official start of the 4th period of the EEA and Norway grants. The NFP highlighted the importance of the event that gave a great chance to look back at what has been managed to achieve together over the past years - projects that promote social inclusion, drive innovation, support civil society, protect the environment and strengthen the ties between Slovakia and the Donor countries. The NFP expressed pride in the ongoing implementation of programmes funded by the EEA and Norway Grants, and extended special thanks to the Donors, the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Vienna and the Embassy of Iceland in Vienna for their continuous support. The Norwegian Embassy in Vienna expressed its sincere appreciation of the cooperation with everyone involved, and the NFP in particular, since the Embassy became side accredited to Slovakia in July 2023. The EEA and Norway grants continued to increased knowledge about Norway and Iceland in Slovakia.

Progress under the programmes and closure status

The NFP provided a summary of the EEA and Norway Grants 2014-2021 in Slovakia, presenting key figures for the six programmes supported by the grants. The NFP gave overview of the financial allocation for each of the programmes showing the original allocations from 2016 and the final allocations. The NFP displayed the overall financial status as of May 2025 with the contracting being at 99%, the disbursement at almost 91% and spending at 88%. The best result in terms of spending was in culture programme and the programme with the lowest spending was in the field of innovation.

The NFP pointed out that 189 projects were supported throughout the 2014-2021 programming period. Out of them 173 projects had been successfully completed and 16 projects have been partly completed (two), terminated (12) or cancelled (two). The NFP just briefly mentioned the achievements reached under the programmes as that was presented in detail the day before at the conference.

Observing the implementation

Throughout the 2014-2021 programming period 8 annual meetings have been organized, of these two were held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, seven strategic reports have been elaborated and approved with the final strategic report arriving soon. The NFP presented its monitoring activities that started back in 2020 with the business development, innovation and SMEs programme and continued with climate change mitigation and adaptation programme in 2021, local development, poverty reduction and roma inclusion programme and good governance, accountable institutions, transparency /cross-border cooperation programme in 2023 and the domestic and gender-based violence programme in 2024. The NFP informed the participants of the final evaluation activities that started in April 2025 due to lengthy procurement processes. The first draft of the

evaluation report of all programmes by external evaluators should be completed in August 2025. The NFP provided an update on audits and irregularities. The audit authority carried out 33 audits, of these, 23 audits on projects, 4 systematic audits and 6 audits on designation. The last audit started in April 2025 and it is expected that it will be finalized by the end of this year. There have been 40 irregularities reported until the end of 2024, particularly those related to public procurement procedures in cultural, business, and climate programmes. Out of these 28 have been closed already.

Promoting the EEA and Norway Grants

The NFP provided an overview of communication activities. In 2016, two web pages were launched but these web pages are in fact identical. Through these webpages the NFP communicates with public mainly the call for proposals, basic documents and updates. The main communication channel remains Facebook webpage. The NFP shared statistics on social media engagement, noting an increase in posts from 62 in 2019 to 260 in 2022, and a growth in followers from 540 in 2017 to 2,400 in 2023. The NFP ran several communication campaigns on Facebook. In 2018 during the campaign „Grants in a nutshell“ a competition „The best national slogan of the Grants“ was launched with a winning slogan „Together for good ideas“. Educational campaign “Get to know the EEA and Norway Grants” prepared together with the Norwegian Embassy in Bratislava jointly reached 100 000 views. Another key initiative was the campaign „16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence campaign“ in autumn 2023. The NFP mentioned the ongoing campaign that started on 17 May 2025, inspired by the #OurStories campaign run by the FMO, which involves presenting one programme through selected projects each week.

Limits and barriers of the implementation

The NFP admitted that this programming period was probably the most challenging one, grouping the limits and barriers into structural, operational and external. The most significant structural barriers being a complex result framework and a limited number of project promoters while the most significant operational barriers being insufficient experience of programme operator and public procurement on construction works. The external barriers that were completely beyond the NFPs control were the pandemic COVID-19, subsequent heavy price increase on construction works, material and energies followed by the Russian invasion to Ukraine as well as the local elections in Slovakia. Despite these challenges the NFP expressed pride in the implementation of programmes funded by the EEA and Norway Grants.

Bilateral cooperation

The NFP briefly summarised the success in bilateral cooperation providing financial overview of the fund. The total allocation of the fund nearly doubled in the last year of implementation to approximately €5.3 million. The NFP highlighted that the entire allocated amount has been contracted. The total amount paid out is approximately €5.2 million. Current spending stands at around 53% of the allocation. Final reports from projects are still being processed and should increase the spending percentage to approximately 85%. The NFP presented in detail the estimated spending in open calls and predefined initiatives indicating several reports pending approval. The TREBØ initiative was presented as the largest initiative under the Fund for Bilateral Relations highlighting the complexity of activities and the positive community impact it had on people in Trenčín. The NFP concluded this topic with certain lessons learned:

- High demand for open calls, indicated a clear need to continue these calls.
- Approval processes for predefined initiatives are too lengthy and need to be streamlined.
- There is a need for greater flexibility in fund management to speed up and simplify procedures.
- Stronger communication and coordination among all stakeholders is required to ensure transparency and efficiency.
- Early planning and engagement are crucial for smoother and faster implementation of calls.

Discussion

The discussion raised concerns about the impact of poorly performing programmes on overall absorption rates, particularly referencing the innovation programme that was affected by legislative changes.

It was noted that public procurement checks can take an extensive amount of time, with one project promoter reporting a 17-month delay in the procurement check process.

It was agreed on the importance of having a proactive approach in the new programming period, indicating a shift from reactive to proactive management of programme implementation.

The NFP expressed concern about the low absorption rates in project implementation, particularly in public administration, where commitment to start projects is often lacking noting that there was zero percent absorption in the first three years for certain projects, which later improved to 100% after intervention indicating the need for stricter measures to ensure project promoters are held accountable for timely implementation, suggesting that funds could be reallocated if they do not meet deadlines.

There was a concern regarding the risks of over-contracting, particularly the potential for overspending if funds are not properly managed. It was mentioned that The Ministry of Finance had previously denied requests for exemptions related to over-contracting.

The idea is to prioritize results over strict spending percentages, with an acknowledgment that not all funds will be spent, and that the focus should be on effective project outcomes.

The NFP expressed concern about the lack of project submissions from the artistic sector, which was expected to contribute more significantly to the portfolio of funded projects.

Conclusion and closing remarks

The meeting concluded with the NFP expressing satisfaction with the progress and outcomes of the programmes as well as with the organisation of the Closing and Opening conference of the EEA and Norway grants. It was decided that this meeting is the last annual meeting for the 3rd programme period, and participants expressed gratitude for the cooperation and efforts made during this time.

Annex 1 - List of Participants