



Evaluation of the Relevance of the Objectives of Operational Programme Research and Development in Terms of their Achievement

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Prepared by: Slovak Organization for Research and Development Activities, o.z.

Recommendations and specific proposals

Based on the results from analyses, surveys, interviews, evaluations and specific conclusions, the evaluator recommends the following measures be taken in order to improve management and implementation of OP Research and Development:

1. Introducing trust in the implementation process

Trust between providers of financial aid and the scientific community is a fundamental prerequisite for operation of the research ecosystem. Structural funds have become an integral part of the system in recent years. Trust must dwell on principles of straightforward, simple, transparent and objective implementation in combination with clear and tough sanctions for those who violate rules, regardless of the level. A quality implementation system has to be as simple as possible at the same time. The provider should act entirely only within the scope of effective legislation, regulations, contracts and manuals during implementation. The provider, when checking whether the provided aid was used cost-effectively, effectively and for the specified purpose, should certainly not go beyond the scope of the above. The Manual for Beneficiaries, in particular, has to clearly and specifically define rights and responsibilities.

In that regard there is need to simplify the entire system of implementation of structural funds in Slovakia on the part of CCA as well. MA for Research and Development, via its powers, should initiate such simplification at the level of the Monitoring Committee for a Knowledge-Based Economy or of the National Monitoring Committee for the National Strategic Reference Framework. The government of SR is also aware of the need to reduce administrative burdens and make the entire system simpler, and reiterated that need in the Strategy Phoenix: *“pursue to significantly reduce bureaucracy in drawing and administering funds”*.¹ There is yet another strategic government document pointing at the issue of bureaucracy in implementation of structural funds, Minerva 2.0, in which the government of SR stated, *“One of the major reasons for the low drawing rate is an extremely demanding administration system of EU structural funds which, owing to specific requirements by the Slovak legislation and managing and intermediate bodies introduced many complex rules and exhausting demands on project implementers instead of seeking to make use of mechanisms available in the system to simplify the entire process. Project implementers and the managing authorities alike, are overwhelmed with administrative procedures to a degree that the delays in handling and assessing requests for payments jeopardize the very existence of beneficiaries who are have to pay their bills and loan instalments. It is desirable, taking example from other countries, to reduce the administrative burden down to what is absolutely necessary and required by the European Union and to improve effectiveness in the practical implementation of simplified rules.”*²

Recommendations by the evaluator:

- Devise a simple implementation system based on trust and clearly defined sanctions for those who violate rules;

¹ Aktualizácia dlhodobého zámeru štátnej vednej a technickej politiky do roku 2015 (Stratégia Fénix), kap. 3.6.

² Minerva 2.0. Slovensko do prvej ligy, riešenie S.2.

- Update the Manual for Beneficiaries. The manual should be better structured, broken down by units such as headings, chapters, bullets, etc. and should be a document offering all information and instructions needed by beneficiaries for project implementation;
- Introduce an annual questionnaire-based assessment by beneficiaries;
- Introduce a system for quality assessment of answers given to emailed questions and inquiries.

2. *Speeding up implementation*

OP Research and Development is one of the worst performing programmes in terms of contracting rate and drawing down of funds. Several factors have caused the situation and there is certain risk that allocations will not be fully drawn. The evaluator proposes the following recommendation:

- Speed up selection of projects for calls under measures 3.1 and 5.1;
- Announce calls under measures 2.2 and 4.2, covering the entire pending allocation;
- Support a limited number of major research projects (science parks or research centres);
- Clearly determine that research infrastructures (especially instruments and equipment) can be used by beneficiaries in conducting projects under the 7th Framework Programme and other EU initiatives;
- Refrain from revision of OP Research and Development.

3. *Keep reducing the administrative burden*

Administrative hurdles stretch the time needed to conduct a project and OP implementation. The EC plans to significantly reduce administrative burden for projects under Horizon 2020. For that reason the evaluator recommends to keep adopting measures to reduce administrative burden for OP Research and Development as well through the following measures:

- Refrain from demanding documents from beneficiaries which the provider already has or which are issued by other state and public administration authorities;
- Simplify reporting of personnel expenditures;
- Abolish time-recording reports for employees and researchers who work full-time on a project;
- Make more extensive use of pre-financing and apply advance payments for the public sector;
- Introduce flat-rate expenditures;
- Speed-up checking of requests for payment by combining the formal and content checks into one.

4. *Measurable indicators and actual scientific results*

Results of projects conducted under OP Research and Development are evaluated practically only through attainment of target values of measurable indicators. The actual scientific benefit to the economy and society is not evaluated almost at all. As a matter of fact, there is no definition of all used indicators and how they are attained. The following measures are recommended by the evaluator:

- Clearly define all used measurable indicators, including the method of their attainment and documentation;
- Focus on attainment of output indicators rather than input indicators;

- Aggregate each indicator at measure, priority axis, and programme levels;
- Introduce a mandatory indicator (indicators) for every call.

5. Principles for further use of EU SFs for research and development in Slovakia

The mid-term evaluation clearly showed that aid from structural funds has had favourable effects on Slovak science which had been underfunded for a long time. Financial aid for research and development from structural funds has proven beneficial especially during the economic crisis, since the sector was getting funding regardless of the status of the state budget. Discussions have started on the nature of EU cohesion policy for the 2014-2020 programming period both at Slovak and EU levels. The final amount of aid from EU structural funds for Slovakia for that period is not yet known, but (with respect to EC proposals) a minimum 20% of all aid allocation will go to support research development and innovation capacities. There is no specific information at the national level about the number of operational programmes or their focus but it is very likely that there will be an operational programme covering the concerned areas.

Based on the mid-term evaluation of OP Research and Development the evaluator recommends to continue implementing interventions in order to direct aid from EU structural funds to support research and development capacities in the programming period 2014-2020. The recommendation also is, in line with EU policies for this area, to direct a minimum 20% of the total budget for EU structural funds at measures supporting research, development and innovation capacities in the next programming period. The evaluator recommends the new operational programme be designed on the following fundamental principles:

- Direct a minimum of two-thirds of financial resources from the OP to support major projects (university-based science parks, research centres, etc.);
- Focus on supporting a smaller number of priority axes where Slovak science is competitive;
- Permit further use of structural funds for R&D also in Bratislava Region;
- Devise a simple OP implementation system and keep reducing the administrative burden;
- Define a clear strategy for its implementation (call announcements made in a logical follow-up pattern);
- Permit public higher education institutions to draw grant aid up to 100% of eligible expenditures;
- Set up the OP so that it is complementary to Horizon 2020;
- Assess and select projects similarly to other grant schemes;
- Involve international evaluators in assessment and selection of submissions;
- Evaluate project results through final scientific (peer) reviews;
- Introduce the institution of Decision about a grant (subsidy) to substitute for a Grant Contract;
- Include preparation of projects in eligible expenditures.

With regard to the current implementation and poor interrelation between respective components of the state policy to support research and development and the specific status of that area under structural funds, the evaluator recommends considering, as one of the potential alternatives, to designate the section for science and technology of Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport to be the managing authority for the new operational programme in the next programming period. The Slovak Research and Development Agency could be IB/MA. That arrangement will ensure

a direct interlink to the state policy, harmonise the way of project selection and implementation of two essential national schemes for R&D support, and bring a higher added value. An important factor of interlinking all schemes is that the state science and innovation policy will be used as a blanket policy in management and implementation of all public funding. If the above form of implementation of EU structural funds for R&D is not feasible, the evaluator recommends the MA closely cooperates in OP implementation with the section for science and technology of Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport, and ASFEU with SRDA, in particular in preparation of a new OP and, subsequently, in defining themes for calls.