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Increase EU Fund Absorption, Eliminate Gold-plating and Provide Result-oriented Investments in the 2021-2027 Period

Project Public Brief

Technical Support Instrument
Supporting reforms in 27 Member States

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ÚRAD PODPREDSEDU VLÁDY SLOVENSKEJ REPUBLIKY PRE PLÁN OBNOVY A ZNALOSTNÚ EKONOMIKU

MINISTERSTVO INVESTÍCIÍ, REGIONÁLNEHO ROZVOJA A INFORMATIZÁCIE SLOVENSKEJ REPUBLIKY

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Table of Contents

Context of the project 4
Presentation of the Beneficiary Authority 5
Description of the needs 5
Methodology 8
Key deliverables and activities of the project 9
Example subtitle: Activity 1 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Example subtitle: Activity 2 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Consultation with stakeholders and workshops 9
Main findings and lessons learnt 11
Expected results 14
Expected impact 14

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Context of the project

The project is funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument managed by the European Commission Reform and Investment Task Force (SG REFORM).

The Slovak Republic has suffered from chronically low distribution and absorption capacity of European Funds. For the 2014-2020 programming period, Slovakia was allocated a total Cohesion Policy envelope of EUR 20.5 billion. However, by the end of 2023, only EUR 18.2 billion (89%) had been spent (European Commission, 2024[2]) and Slovakia faced decommitments in 2018. In the 2021-2027 programming period, Slovakia will benefit from a total of EUR 16.1 billion in EU Cohesion Policy funding (with EUR 12.6 billion from the EU and EUR 3.5 billion from national co-financing) (European Commission, 2024[3]). By 24 May 2024, 130 calls had been launched, and nearly 500 contracts have been signed with an allocation of EUR 2.3 billion (EU source), representing 19% of the total programme allocation. As of May 2024, only EUR 256 million (2% of the total envelope) had been paid to beneficiaries (MIRRI, 2024[4]).

Slovakia spent around 3.5% of GDP on public investment over the past two decades, above the EU average but less than its regional peers (Czechia, Hungary and Poland) (OECD, 2024[5]). EU Cohesion Policy funds accounted for 60% of total public investment in Slovakia in the 2014-2020 programming period (European Commission, 2021[6]), or 2.44% of its GDP on average, making Slovakia the country with the highest Cohesion Policy funding per capita in the EU (EUR 380 versus EU average of EUR 113) (European Commission, 2024[7]). On the one hand, this could be considered as a positive adherence to EU Cohesion Policy, but on the other hand it could be considered as an overdependence on EU financial support. Still, as noted above, absorption of EU funds continues to be a challenge for Slovakia. Taking into account the strong dependence on such support, increasing Slovakia's absorption and effective use of these funds is then critical to supporting economic growth, reducing socio-economic gaps, and accelerating the green transition (OECD, 2024[5]). Not only is ensuring sufficient public investment important, so is ensuring quality public investment. Studies indicate that the quality of public investment spending overall is estimated to increase GDP per capita by 0.5% in 10 years and 2.0% by 2060 (OECD, 2024[5]).

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Presentation of the Beneficiary Authority

The national authority that requested technical support from this Project is the Government Office of the Slovak Republic (*Úrad Vlády Slovenskej Republiky*). Other beneficiaries listed in the original project design were:

- The Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Digitalisation (*Ministerstvo investícií, regionálneho rozvoja a informatizácie Slovenskej republiky - MIRRI*);
- Regional and local governments of Slovakia and their associations;
- European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) managing/intermediatemedia/implementing bodies.

Following the national election on 30 September 2023, the main beneficiaries of the project shifted to MIRRI and the newly formed Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Recovery and Resilience Plan and Knowledge Economy.

Many more organisations and institutions benefited from this project due its collaborative structures and approach. The Joint Working Commission (JWC) and three working groups included representatives from across the Managing Authority, 10 Intermediate Bodies, the Government Office, the Public Procurement Office (PPO), and representatives of beneficiaries, such as Association of Self-Governing Regions of Slovakia, Union of Towns and Cities of Slovakia, Association of Towns and Villages of Slovakia, and Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region.

Description of the needs

Slovakia is implementing the largest reform of EU Fund management in the country's history with the goal of improving absorption of EU funds (EU Funds for Social Europe, n.d.[1]). This reform involves consolidating the previous six Operational Programmes into one large programme "Programme Slovakia" (PSVK) under a single Managing Authority (MA) housed in the Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Digitisation (MIRRI), which also acts as the central coordination body. The reform, if implemented effectively, could reinforce national strategic programming and better link the regional and local levels to programming processes, helping generate more integrated planning and implementation. Importantly as well, the reform could improve the administration of EU funds through a more streamlined programme structure and standardised processes.

As a first step in the project, the OECD undertook a comprehensive review of Slovakia's management and control system. As a result of this review, it identified 4 key areas where to focus administrative capacity building efforts to improve the efficiency of funds management and absorption rates, and identified specific needs under each area. This created the basis for the development of working groups in the second phase of the project:

1. **Human Resources and capacity development:**

Identified issues:

- Changes being implemented will have an impact on organisations, functions, staff and their workload.
- New skills will likely be needed and in new places, as a result of these changes AND in order to implement new (better) projects (e.g. ITIs).
- So far these does not seem to be a detailed assessment/mapping of these changes, nor a plan to implement them.
- This suggests an urgent need to map changes, design change management plans, and align learning and development initiatives.

Opportunities for impact:

- There do appear to be plans to conduct capacity analysis and design methodologies to assess workforce needs.
- There is also a recognised need for capacity building initiative – and to revise the training plan to take these into consideration.

2. Programming, call design and project selection

Identified issues:

- A long-term vision/strategy for investment is not yet in place, and an integrated, place-based approach to Programme design (prioritisation) and implementation is lacking.
    - Coordination among MA, IB, regional partners exists, but does not effectively serve the purpose of generating integrated and place-based investment.
- Fragmentation of calls and room for better anchoring calls to the investment priorities of the Programme.
- Limited focus on project content and quality in project selection.

Opportunities for impact:

- The national investment strategy is being developed, which can guide the next (2028-2034) programming exercise.
- Many existing coordination mechanisms could be used to foster integrated investment.
- Using ITI to engage subnational actors in defining investment priorities and projects could be strengthened.

3. Project preparation and beneficiary relations

Identified issues:

- Room to take a more strategic approach to beneficiary capacity building.
    - Limited evidence and assessment of beneficiary capacity across different beneficiary groups.
    - Room for more coordinated and streamlined beneficiary capacity building measures and information provided to beneficiaries.
    - A sanction-oriented culture rather than a “beneficiary-oriented” culture in the Management and Control System.
- Weak project preparation capacity among beneficiaries, especially at the subnational level.

Opportunities for impact:

- Using measures to understand beneficiary needs (e.g., surveys; beneficiary/project database).
- Using regional centres as one-stop-shops for beneficiaries.
- Sharing more standardised information with beneficiaries.

4. Public Procurement

Identified issues:

- Establishing a more effective control system for EU funds, as the previous one was complex and caused delays. The new centralised control system aims to streamline processes but needs adequate resources and coordination to succeed.
- The efficacy of Slovakia's recently adopted risk-based approach to EU fund controls depends heavily on the effectiveness of its methodology to accurately detect irregularities and optimise processes within public procurement.
- Helping beneficiaries navigate Slovakia's complex procurement procedures for EU-funded projects is a major challenge, requiring clear support, communication, and capacity-building efforts for effective implementation.

Opportunities for impact:

- The control of public procurement contracts is carried out by one intermediary body – PPO (taking over both ex ante and ex post controls) is an opportunity to avoid duplicative controls and overlaps.
- Creation of a coordination committee established by the PPO to facilitate communication and collaboration among the entities involved in public procurement.
- Identification of risk factors carried out, based on historical data.
- Development of a ‘’Single Guide for Beneficiaries on the Process and Control for Public Procurement’.’

Methodology

The project was structured in three phases: stock-taking, action planning, and implementation.

During the stock-taking phase, the OECD employed various methods to identify challenges and opportunities for reform. This included document reviews, key informant semi-structured interviews online and in-person, and some comparative data analysis. The OECD was able to leverage extensive work conducted in relevant fields with other countries to identify promising practices that could be adapted to the Slovakian context.

The action planning phase saw the development of three working groups to delve deeper into the issues identified in the stock taking analysis, prioritise specific issues, agree on concrete recommendations and develop action plans to address them. In this phase, the OECD employed various online and in-person facilitation techniques, surveys and online co-creation workshops to develop and validate the action plans.

During the implementation phase, the Slovakian working group chairs drove the action, with the OECD's support and guidance. In this phase the OECD held regular check-in meeting and employed an online tracking tool to monitor progress on implementing the actions. The OECD also contributed to 4 online seminars, with specific international examples related to each of the working groups' themes to help inspire effective implementation approaches.

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Key deliverables and activities of the project

Output 1: Kick-off meeting

A high-level kick-off meeting was held on 19 September 2023. Slovakia was represented by Prime Minister Ľudovít Ódor, as well as Lívia Vašáková, Deputy Prime Minister; Michal Horváth, Minister of Finance; and Barbora Lukáčová, State Secretary at the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization. The European Commission was represented by Mario Nava, Director General, DG REFORM. The OECD was represented by Janos Bertok, Deputy Director of Public Governance.

Output 2: Review of the ESIF ecosystem in the Slovak Republic

The OECD reviewed the legal, institutional and management frameworks that govern the entire Funds' ecosystem in the Slovak Republic, with a view to identify bottlenecks and opportunities for simplification.

Activity 2.1: Support the establishment of a Joint Working Commission

The Slovak authorities established a Joint Working Commission (JWC) composed of the representatives of government bodies that are responsible for the implementation of the Funds. The OECD advised the Slovak authorities on the establishment of the JWC, provided input on the agenda of the meetings and helped to facilitate these meetings.

Activity 2.2: Collect documents and scoping interviews

The OECD collected and reviewed relevant documentation from the Slovak authorities including legislation, regulations, management and control system documentation, public procurement guidance and practices and other relevant material. The OECD also conducted a small number of online scoping interviews with key stakeholders in the MIRRI, to contextualise the documents and identify key issues to be further explored in activity 2.3.

Activity 2.3: Organise stakeholder interviews and workshops

Based on the document collection and review developed in Activity 2.2, the OECD conducted a one week fact-finding mission to interview relevant stakeholders and develop a deeper understanding of the documentation collected and analysed during the previous activity.

Activity 2.4: Synthesize key findings in a diagnostic analysis

The OECD drafted the findings from the relevant activities in output 2, to outline the main issues identified in the ecosystem of the Funds, to be addressed in output 3.

Output 3: Comprehensive report summarising the recommendations from the conducted reviews and a proposed action plan for adoption of recommended measures

To address the key challenges identified in output 2, the OECD developed a comprehensive report with recommendations and an action plan for the adoption of the recommended measures. The recommendations were supported by international good practices from other countries.

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Activity 3.1: Select and create working groups to focus on aspects of simplification

Building on the results of output 2, the OECD proposed 4 working groups, although two were merged due to perceived overlaps in their mandates and membership. The three final working groups focused on 1) Strategic programming, project preparation and beneficiary relations; 2) human resource, and 3) public procurement. They were composed of the most relevant stakeholders for each area, including government officials, and representatives of beneficiaries.

Activity 3.2: Identify specific recommendations for simplification

In the first instance, the OECD convened the working groups and presented the diagnostic assessment created in output 2. The OECD, together with the working groups, used this diagnostic analysis to identify concrete recommendations within their respective areas of focus. These were discussed together at the JWC to ensure coherence across the different areas/working groups.

Activity 3.3: Develop action plans for transformation

Once the recommendations were identified, the OECD conducted online and in-person workshop with the working groups to identify specific actions for the implementation of the recommendations, including the bodies that should lead these actions and those who should contribute, the expected results and a timeline.

Activity 3.4: Draft one comprehensive report and a proposed action plan

The OECD integrated the recommendations and actions produced under activities 3.2 and 3.3. above to create a comprehensive report and a proposed action plan, highlighting possible complementarities and synergies in the proposed actions. The final Roadmap was validated by the JWC.

Output 4: Implementation report

The OECD supported the Slovak government to establish structures and processes to implement the roadmap developed in Output 3. This was done through the established working groups in Activity 3.1, and monitoring and oversight as described in the following activities. The implementation report is composed of the various written elements developed through this support.

Activity 4.1: Organise an implementation workshop

The OECD designed and delivered a workshop focused on the implementation of the roadmap. This workshop included reflections on good practices for monitoring implementation and change management.

Activity 4.2: Establishing a monitoring mechanism

The OECD worked with the JWC and the working groups to establish a monitoring mechanism that helped to ensure progress implementing the action plan developed in activity 3.4 and identify any roadblocks.

Activity 4.3: Organise regular meetings with the JWC to assess progress and address any bottlenecks.

For the duration of the Project, the OECD met every month with the Slovak project team. At each meeting, the OECD received a status update from the Slovak project team, summarised in a short status note. Every 8 weeks, the meeting also included the JWC, to discuss the

progress made on the Project, challenges encountered and steps to take to overcome these challenges.

Activity 4.4: Produce the implementation report

The OECD compiled the various materials developed through this output, including workshop materials (activity 4.1), the monitoring mechanisms (activity 4.2), status updates and meeting minutes (activity 4.3) into an implementation report. The OECD drafted a short cover note summarising achievements and impact of the actions.

Output 5: Workshops/seminars for representatives of key actors on the simplification measures

The OECD supported the Slovak project team to conduct 4 online seminars to communicate and disseminate the results of outputs 3 and 4, with a view to enabling a common understanding across the actors of the Funds. This included a seminar on investment prioritisation (April 28, 2025), project preparation (18 June, 2025), human resource management (July 3, 2025) and public procurement (July 11, 2025).

Activity 5.1: Design seminars

The OECD, in consultation with the Slovak project team, helped design the online seminars.

Activity 5.2: Support seminars delivered by the Slovak project team

The OECD supported the Slovak project team to deliver the online seminars. The OECD was present and contributed a presentation on international best practices to each seminar.

Consultation with stakeholders and workshops

The project was designed to ensure a high level of engagement with stakeholders throughout. This was most evident in the establishment of the three working groups and Joint Working Commission described and discussed above. Through these bodies, the OECD interacted with a broad range of stakeholders across the Management and Control System, including representatives from all Intermediary Bodies and associations of beneficiaries. The OECD met online with the working groups on multiple occasions, especially during the development of the action plans. In-person workshops were also held to prioritise actions, validate the action plans, and discuss implementation activities.

Main findings and lessons learnt

Strategic programming, project selection and beneficiary relations

The activities conducted by the Working Group on Strategic Programming, Project Selection, and Beneficiary Relations marked an important step in improving the management of European Structural Funds in Slovakia. One lesson learnt is to strike balance between a broad, strategic perspective and ensuring that the activities yield tangible results within the EU

fund management framework. For instance, while developing a comprehensive framework for public investment prioritisation is crucial, it is equally important that this framework be used by the IB units in the line ministries when they design investment measures and calls. Below are some high-level reflections from the Working Group activities:

- **Continuously build the capacity of the MA, IBs and regions to use the available framework and data to support investment prioritisation**. While the Working Group developed the instrument to be used by the MA, IBs and regions to set priorities, it is important to continuously build their capacity to use the tools and collected evidence for priority-setting. Such capacity-building can be done by guiding them to consider the right data, providing resources and examples, and facilitating regular peer-learning.

- **Enhance communication and coordination platforms for all management and control system actors, including regions and municipalities**. This is critical to generating strategic coherence in programming and facilitating implementation. Doing so may require cultural shifts, including transforming attitudes, behaviours, and practices to prioritise collaboration, shared ownership, and trust over sector-focused and siloed approaches. This goes beyond formal consultation and requires fostering openness, and proactive engagement across sectors and among levels of government.

- **Address beneficiary capacity gaps through a comprehensive and differentiated approach**. When developing initiatives that support beneficiaries, it is essential to address the specific challenges faced by different types of beneficiaries and not to treat them as one group. Beneficiaries carry out more tasks than just preparing and planning projects. They help shape the programme and calls; coordinate with various public and private actors; monitor and report project results. Building beneficiary capacity throughout the investment cycle is a cross-cutting task and requires various measures and tools to tackle different capacity gaps.

Human Resources

One of the factors underpinning the three activities developed by the working group on human resource management is the need to develop workforce management processes that are strategic and flexible enough, tailored to the needs of EU funds management in Slovakia. The activities developed by the working group are long-term in nature, and it is encouraging to see that work has already begun in early 2025 on implementation. The following aspects have already begun to be explored in the context of the activities of this action plan, and could underpin planning for the 2028 – 2035 Programming Period.

- **Anticipate and plan for the high turnover of senior leadership.** The frequent turnover of senior leadership within Slovakia's EU funds management system poses a challenge to stability, long-term strategic planning, and effective fund absorption. To address this, Slovakia could implement structured succession planning within Managing Authorities (MAs) and Intermediate Bodies (IBs), ensuring that leadership transitions are smooth and knowledge transfer is prioritised.

- **Use coordination mechanisms established I this project to determine the right balance between centralised control and delegation of workforce management.** Finding the right balance between centralised oversight and delegated responsibilities for workforce management can help structure a strategic and effective system. A balanced approach can allow for flexibility in addressing ministries' unique contexts

while still ensuring common standards and conditions across government and enabling a whole of system approach to workforce transformation.

- **Reflect on the need for a new type of EU fund expert.** Slovakia's EU funds management system requires professionals who can go beyond administrative compliance to actively shape strategic investments. To attract and retain a new generation of EU fund professionals, Slovakia should establish clear career pathways, promote cross-sector experience sharing, and offer specialised training in areas such as project evaluation, financial engineering, and digital transformation.

- **Explore common salary systems and job classification frameworks.** Slovakia's civil service framework governing EU funds management must be adaptable to changing regulations, financial cycles, and evolving policy priorities. Inconsistent salary structures and job classifications within Slovakia's EU funds management system contribute to recruitment and retention difficulties, particularly for skilled professionals who may find more competitive opportunities elsewhere. Aligning salaries and job classifications across Managing Authorities, Intermediate Bodies, and regional offices could enhance transparency and ensure fair compensation.

Public Procurement

The activities developed by the working group on public procurement highlight the need to create a procurement system that is both efficient and adaptable, while ensuring the integrity and effectiveness of EU funds management in Slovakia. However, strengthening procurement practices goes beyond streamlining the risk-based methodology or providing capacity-building initiatives, as it requires continuous improvement, oversight, and refinement. By tracking training impact, evaluating methodology effectiveness, and ensuring continuous monitoring of the action plan, stakeholders can ensure that the outcomes of the action plan are sustainable, and that procurement practices remain adaptive, efficient, and aligned with evolving challenges and objectives.

- **Tracking the impact of capacity-building initiatives.** Trainings and support tools developed under the action plan aim to strengthen the capacity of intermediate bodies and beneficiaries in managing procurement risks. To assess their effectiveness, participation data, retention rates, and feedback should be systematically gathered. A key indicator of success will be a measurable reduction in common procurement errors — for example, improvements in the correct completion of IRMAVO forms. Long-term impact should also be monitored through follow-up assessments, case studies, and practical examples of improved procurement outcomes. Insights gained can inform the development of additional tools such as manuals, templates, and guidance documents.

- **Assessing the effectiveness of the risk-based methodology.** The risk-based methodology is a cornerstone of the action plan and requires continuous validation to remain relevant. Systematic reviews of flagged cases can help refine risk indicators and their weightings based on real procurement data. Benchmarking against other countries' approaches can also support improvements. In addition, monitoring trends in compliance, timelines, and error correction rates pre and post-validation reviews will help assess whether the methodology is improving oversight and control in practice, supporting continuous refinement of the methodology.

- **Ensuring overall continuous improvement through regular monitoring of the action plan.** Sustaining long-term success requires a structured approach to

continuous improvement and accountability. Regular progress reviews, involving key stakeholders such as IBs, the PPO, and MIRRI, can help identify emerging challenges, share lessons learned, and adjust priorities. Concise progress reports should document key findings and achievements, remaining bottlenecks, and next steps, while stakeholder feedback can be used to not only enhance transparency and track responsibilities, but also to refine training content, risk indicators, and ITMS functionalities. Lessons learned should be used to inform future strategies and align them more effectively with broader program objectives.

Expected results

The project is expected to the result in the following elements identified in the action plans:

1. **Strategic programming, project preparation and beneficiary relations**
   - A multi-criteria prioritisation framework to help assess investment priorities.
   - A roadmap for enhancing project preparation and beneficiary support.
   - A pilot call for Integrated Territorial Investment.
   - A practical guideline for the MA and IBs to improve their stakeholder engagement practices.

2. **Human resource management**
   - A methodology for allocating personnel in Intermediate Bodies.
   - A strategy for the coordination of workforce management between the Managing Authority and Intermediate Bodies.
   - An improved learning and development ecosystem.

3. **Public procurement**
   - A robust training and capacity-building program tailored to the needs of IBs and beneficiaries.
   - A validated and refined risk-based methodology to address procurement challenges.

Expected impact

The implementation of the Programme Slovakia 2021-27 has made substantial progress. Within two years – from the end of 2023 to July 2025 – over EUR 1 billion has been invested, representing 8.8% of the total programme allocation. The Managing Authority has contracted EUR 5.4 billion to more than 2 000 projects, marking a remarkable increase from just 13 contracted projects at the end of 2023. This momentum of accelerating implementation is expected to continue, particularly in project selection and contracting. As of July 2025, 307 calls for proposals have been launched, covering nearly 80% of the programme's total funds; over 5 600 applications have been submitted, indicating strong interest and uptake from potential beneficiaries.

Strategic Programming, Project Preparation, and Beneficiary Relations

The Slovak Republic has built a foundation for a holistic, strategic approach to enhance EU fund investment management, including strong, inclusive stakeholder engagement. The structured series of activities implemented by the Working Group – with support from the OECD – systematically addressed key challenges throughout the investment cycle. The development of IPS 2050 and the investment prioritisation framework (Activity 1) will help enhance investment planning and lead to more targeted resource allocation. The bottom-up ITI design and stakeholder engagement guideline (Activity 3 and 4) will help optimise EU fund management procedures. The project preparation roadmap (Activity 2) will address downstream beneficiary operational challenges in project preparation. The outcomes of these activities benefit not only the Programme Slovakia 2021-27 and programmes post 2027, but also broader public investment management in Slovak Republic. The Slovak team's successful implementation of a bottom-up, multi-stakeholder approach to implementing action plan activities facilitated extensive collaboration and engagement across various government departments and external stakeholders. This inclusive approach fostered a deeper understanding and commitment among stakeholders regarding results-oriented investment of EU funds. It also reinforced collaborative dynamics, essential for effective investment management for the current Programme Slovakia and post 2027. It is expected that the implementation of these activities will contribute to more sustainable outcomes and long-term institutional development.

Human Resources

The activities undertaken by the Human Resources Working Group represent a coherent and strategic effort to strengthen administrative capacity for more efficient management of EU funds. By improving workforce flexibility, promoting mobility, defining clearer career paths, and modernising training systems, these initiatives are addressing long-standing structural and operational challenges within the management and control system. These activities have already resulted in improved communication and coordination mechanisms that support a more responsive and adaptive administrative environment. Once all the activities are fully implemented, they will help ensure that public servants working with EU funds are better allocated, more skilled, and motivated - leading to faster, higher-quality programming, call design, and project implementation. Collectively, these reforms are expected to enhance the effectiveness of the administrative system and contribute directly to improved absorption of EU funds in the current and future programming periods.

Public Procurement

The activities of the Working Group on Public Procurement represent a coordinated and strategic effort to improve the capacity and consistency of procurement practices across the EU fund management system. Through targeted training sessions delivered to beneficiaries and Intermediate Bodies (IBs), the WG has contributed to increased professional awareness and strengthened competencies in applying risk-based approaches and using the new ITMS functionalities. This open communication has enhanced collaboration among stakeholders and promoted greater alignment in procurement procedures. In parallel, the preparation of a methodological guide based on frequently asked questions—planned for publication on the MIRRI website—demonstrates a commitment to transparency and offers a standardised reference for the consistent interpretation of procurement risks. Taken together, these initiatives are contributing to a more professional, transparent, and effective public procurement environment—ultimately supporting the timely and compliant use of EU funds in the current and future programming periods.

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