



First Thematic Evaluation Report

OPERATIONS OF STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE



December 15, 2024

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1. INTRODUCTION

Article 35 of the (EU) Regulation no. 1059/2021 (Interreg Regulation) sets that the managing authority shall carry out evaluations of the programme to improve the quality of programme design and implementation and to assess their effectiveness, efficiency and impact.

The evaluation activity of the INTERREG VI A Italia-Slovenija 2021-2027 (hereinafter Programme) covers the entire programming period and foresees, as required by the Evaluation Plan, approved by the Monitoring Committee of the Programme on May 15th, 2023 and updated on October 2nd, 2024 and as agreed by the Evaluation Working Group (there after WG) during the meeting held on May 30th, 2024 the delivery of 4 thematic evaluation reports, 2 extended evaluation reports and one impact evaluation report. Furthermore, each evaluation report (extensive, thematic, impact), will include a summary of findings. For Programme communication and promotion purposes, four non-technical synthesis of evaluation findings shall be released addressing the general public to be published on the Programme website/social media channels in order to ensure the highest visibility of evaluation findings.

In each evaluation report, a synthesis is included on the coherence of financed projects with environmental objectives as listed in (EU) Regulation 2020/852 and with DNSH principle following environmental indicators as set in the Programme IT-SI Monitoring Environmental Plan published on the Programme website <https://www.ita-slo.eu/en/documenti/valutazione-del-programma>.

As required by the Evaluation Plan, this First Thematic Evaluation Report focuses on the Programme intervention effectiveness referring to the achievements by the three operations of strategic importance (there after OSI) considered as a whole with particular attention to the progress and performance on communication and governance strategies performed for the OSI. The document ends with a synthesis of findings as overview on the first achievements of the Programme in the field of this Thematic Evaluation Report.

This report is drafted following the methodological note shared with the WG and approved by the Managing Authority (there after MA) on July 23rd, 2024 and presents all the information and data gathered and analysed by the evaluator in order to answer to the evaluation questions set for the Operations of strategic importance.

2. OPERATIONS OF STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE (REGULATION AND PROGRAMME DEFINITION AND REQUESTS)

The Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 defines in Article 2 an 'Operation of strategic importance' as "an operation which provides a significant contribution to the achievement of the objectives of a programme and which is subject to particular monitoring and communication measures".

Following this definition, the Programme and its Appendix 3 on Operations for Strategic importance identified three projects.

During the previous programming period Strategic Projects were also financed, but the Border Orientation Paper Italy Slovenia (Ref. Ares(2019)3244965 - 17/05/2019) pointed out as an issue that "the consistence between the requirements for the definition of strategic projects, essentially top-down driven, and the selection approach chosen, i.e. open calls more suitable for bottom-up approach, created some concerns". For this reason, the Programme Managing Authority together with the Programme Task Force (a body made of Programme partners institutions set up to define the 2021-2027 Programme) introduced during the programming phase new procedures for the selection and governance of the strategic projects inserting their content and partnership milestones directly in the programme document and its Annex 3 to avoid the issues faced in the previous programming period.

The CPR sets also the rules for visibility and communication and in Article 46 (a) states that *Each Member State shall ensure the visibility of support in all activities relating to operations supported by the Funds with particular attention to operations of strategic importance*. Furthermore, in Article 50 (1) (e) it is set that is a responsibility of beneficiaries that *for operations of strategic importance [...], organising a communication event or activity, as appropriate, and involving the Commission and the responsible managing authority in a timely manner*.

For this reason, among the main objectives of the Programme communication and visibility strategy¹ there is the aim of ensuring due visibility to the financed operations of strategic importance with the support of the Slovenian National

¹ Programme communication and visibility strategy Chapter 5. *Approach to communication and visibility for the INTERREG Programme*

Contact Point and the two Italian Regions and according to the set of indicators referred to communication activities².

² Programme communication and visibility strategy Chapter 5 Approach to communication and visibility for the Interreg Programme

3. FINDINGS OF THE ANALYSIS

To acquire all the information about OSI and their design, the evaluators performed a desk analysis and a field analysis as follows.

Desk analysis was performed by assessing the following documents (other than EU Regulations, the Programme + Annexes):

- Invitation Letters to OSI + annexes
- OSI Project Proposals
- Assessing Check Lists/Reports of proposals examination and recommendations/prescriptions made by Project assessors (environmental and DNSH items included)
- OSI LP/PP statements and Partnership Agreement
- OSI Subsidy Contracts+ annexes
- IT-SI Project Implementation Guidelines
- IT-SI Jems guidance for approved projects funded by the Programme

Field analysis was performed by:

a) interviewing:

- the Managing Authority
- the Programme Partner, Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development
- the IT-SI Programme Communication Officer
- the 3 Joint secretariat managers for each OSI
- the 3 Lead Partners of the 3 OSI partnership

b) submitting questionnaires to

- the OSI Project Partners
- the OSI Project Associated partners
- the Citizens (intended as the attendants to OSI public events).

The following table illustrates the scheduling of interviews and surveys:

Interview/Survey	Target	Start	End
Interview	Managing Authority	5/11/2024	-

Interview	LP Adrioncycletour	25/10/2024	-
Interview	LP Poseidone	4/11/2024	-
Interview	LP KRAS-Carso II	14/11/2024	-
Interview	3 OSI officers - JS	7/11/2024	-
Interview	Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development of Slovenija	27/11/2024	-
	MC Deputy member for Ministry of Cohesion of Slovenija		
Survey	Project partners	11/11/2024	13/12/2024
Survey	Associated partners	11/11/2024	13/12/2024
Survey	Citizens	7/11/2024	13/12/2024

The format of interviews and surveys forms are attached as annexes to this document with the interview transcriptions and the results of the surveys.

Globally for all the 3 OSI, the Project partners' survey received a total of 19 answers out of 31, the Associated partners' survey received 3 answers out of 21 while the Citizens' survey gathered a total of 39 answers. Associated partners' survey was not taken into account or analysed due to the not significant number of answers.

3.1 THE THREE OPERATIONS OF STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE IN BRIEF

The Operations design took place involving the members of the Task Force which, after verifying the proposal of the CLLD, decided it was non-applicable for the territory of interventions specifically dedicated to functional areas mainly due to the large differences in the capacity of the territory to implement CLLD strategies and insufficient legal conditions for a bottom up approach. For this reason, it was set to start capitalisation interventions on the results and outputs from Interreg programmes and macro strategies within previous programming periods.

The Task Force first decided to embed the EUSAIR macro strategy flagship. The interventions linked to cycling route running along the coast of the Adriatic Sea in Italy and in Slovenia (coastal network), including its main cycle connections to the hinterland areas (inland network) was indicated as the strategic project ADRIONCYCLETOUT.

The strategic objective related to the Geopark Kras Carso was identified and established as KRAS-CARSO II project in consideration of the functional area of Karst Plateau and capitalization of the results of strategic projects KRAS CARSO carried out in 2007-2013 and of the GeoKarst project in 2014-2020. GeoKarst Project developed a joint management plan for the cross-border geopark. The

main objective of the operation, taking care of intention of the local authorities and the sustainable development of the Classical Karst at the cross-border level, is the establishment of Kras Carso EGTC. KRAS-CARSO II contributes to the sustainable development of the cross-border functional area of the Classical Karst, promoting sustainable tourism, supporting the slow tourism industry in full compliance of the environmental and historical assets of the local area, exploiting the experiences gained within previous Interreg projects.

For the coastal area, the design was more complex because not enough addressed by the experiences of past programming periods, for this reason a new project was indicated with the title of POSEIDONE addressing the issue of water and coastal habitats safeguard in the north Adriatic Sea. This topic was brainstormed in the TF with the support of the European Commission.

The framework for each of the three projects was built by the members of the Task force collecting the needs for strategic cooperation emerging from the territories.

To determine lead partners, the competences, experience and functions of different stakeholders of the Programme area were identified within the TF by the Program partners.

For ADRIONCYCLETOUT was proposed the Directorate for Infrastructure and Territory – Transport, Digital and Sustainable Mobility Infrastructure Service of Regione Friuli Venezia Giulia which led the previous strategic projects in the same sector (e.g. Cross V in 2000-06, Adria-A in 2007-13, Crossmoby in 2014-20).

For KRAS-CARSO II the Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development within the concept of KRAS CARSO OSI project proposed a partnership based on previous projects partners. As lead partner was identified the Karst and Brkini Regional Development Agency, established by 4 municipalities of Slovenian Karst area. The main role of ORA Karst and Brkini agency is to guide the process of the establishment of the EGTC and to promote the strategic development of tourism in the Karst region.

For POSEIDONE was proposed the Development Agency of Eastern Veneto - VeGAL as the most competent actor in terms of design and capacity in the maritime area. Subsequently, the appointed lead partners of each project were involved by the Task force in a participative work in which the main objectives of the projects were shared and lead partners were called to plan activities on the basis of the indicative list identified by National/ Regional Authorities within Task Force. The involvement of Lead partners was useful due to their know-how and territorial competences and functions.

The Task Force verified the balance of partnership useful for a better management.

In Appendix 3 to the INTERREG Programme, the three operations of strategic importance are described by providing the main objective of each operation, the Lead Partner, the duration, timetable and ERDF budget. Furthermore, there is a more detailed Programme annex dedicated to the Operations of strategic importance. Apart from the information contained in Appendix 3, this document contains more details about the indicative activities and the relevant partnership (including the Lead partner, Project partners and associated partners).

Soon after the Commission's Programme approval (August, 3rd 2022), upon approval of the IT-SI Programme Monitoring Committee (following previous decisions and agreements by the Task Force), an Invitation Letter was sent to each Lead Partner of the Operations of Strategic importance. The Letter and its enclosed package of documents were structured as a guide for the project drafting.

The invitation stated that the proposal had to include the full description of:

- ✓ main objective of the project
- ✓ indicative activities of the proposed strategic project
- ✓ partnership
- ✓ timetable
- ✓ budget
- ✓ quantification and description of outputs, deliverables and results (indicators)
- ✓ environmental monitoring and criteria

The invitation included also the information about:

- communication and visibility rules for the beneficiaries
- project submission procedure
- assessment procedure and assessing criteria
- project approval procedure and notification to the beneficiaries
- contracting
- list of documentation available on the IT-SI Programme official website section 2021-27

As CPR Article 73 (Selection of operations) applies for all the operations, the Managing Authority carried out an assessment process for the three OSI. The procedure was divided into the following steps:

1. Formal and Administrative check of the Application Form and related package of documents,
2. Eligibility Assessment of the partnership, time limits, financing and cooperation criteria fulfilment,
3. Quality Assessment of activities, project outputs, budget and communication activities.

The Managing Authority appointed the members of the assessment committee amongst the staff of the Joint Secretariat and, as responsible for investigations (responsabile dell'istruttoria) for procedures concerning the Invitation letters, the coordinator of the Joint Secretariat.

Hereby a short description of each of the three Operations.

ADRIONCYCLETOUR

The Project contributes to define the cycling route running along the coast of the Adriatic Sea in Italy (Friuli Venezia Giulia and Veneto regions) and in Slovenia (coastal network), including its main cycle connections to the hinterland areas (inland network), and supports the development, at EUSAIR level, of an innovative and attractive cross-border/transnational tourism product on the ADRIATIC-IONIAN Cycle Route. The project has an integrated approach of sustainable tourism and mobility, "embedding" an EUSAIR flagship project idea, crosscutting between the tourism and transport sectors, pursuing in a cross-border context objectives on a macro-regional scale. The project capitalizes the results of projects and strategic projects of the past programming periods (i.e. Cross V in 2000-06, Adria-A in 2007-13, strategic project Crossmoby in 2014-20).

Project partnership is composed of 7 members (3 Italians and 4 Slovenian) led by Regione Friuli Venezia Giulia.

Project budget sums up at total 4.375.000 Euro – 3.500.000 Euro ERDF.

The project started in September 2022 and a kick-off meeting was held in mid-February 2023 in Koper.

It is funded under the *Policy objective 4* - A more social and inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and the *Specific objective 6* - Enhancing the role of culture and sustainable tourism in economic development, social inclusion and social innovation.

Project OUTPUTS	Project RESULTS
5 Pilot actions jointly developed and implemented by the project	5 Solutions adopted or enhanced by organizations
8 Jointly organised cross-border public events	
14.1 Km infrastructure for cyclists	
	44 Tourist sites/destinations with increased connectivity to cycling routes

The eligible expenditure progress of the project has reached, at the end of September 2024, the 20% of the total budget. Most of the infrastructural activities have started or will start by the end of 2024 and these will accelerate the expenditure progress and will allow to stick to the timetable set by the Programme.

The main seasonal pilot actions linked to O.2.4, O.2.5, O.2.6, O.2.7 have been already implemented in 2023 and 2024, namely:

- pilot bike-train service on the Bohinj line (O.2.4);
- seasonal bus line from Tolmin to Tarvisio and Kranjska Gora (O.2.5 only in 2023);
- seasonal bus line from Posočje to Čedad/Cividale del Friuli (O.2.5);
- pilot bike-ship service along the Slovenian coast (O.2.6);
- pilot bike-bus service connecting Slovenian Istria and the Karst (O.2.7).

Public events were organized at the beginning of the pilot actions mentioned, linked to O.1.4, O.1.5 (in 2023) and O.1.6 in October 2024.

KRAS-CARSO II

The project contributes to the sustainable development of the cross-border functional area of the Classical Karst, promoting sustainable and slow tourism in full compliance with the environmental and historical assets of the area. The project capitalizes the results of projects and strategic projects of the past programming periods. Its main goal is the establishment of the European Group for Territorial Cooperation - EGTC Kras-Carso for the management of cross-border tourism as well as the financing and management of the Kras-Carso Geopark. To achieve the planned results, the Lead Partner is working closely with all

municipalities, even those that are not project Associated Partners, and carry out the necessary procedures at the municipal councils for the establishment of a joint management structure.

Project partnership is composed of 12 members (5 Italians and 7 Slovenians) led by Območna razvojna agencija Krasa in Brkinov d.o.o. (abbr. ORA Krasa & Brkinov) - ORA Regional Development Agency of Karst and Brkini - and by 14 Associated Partners (7 Italians and 7 Slovenians).

Project budget sums up at total 4.375.000 Euro – 3.500.000 Euro ERDF.

The project started in January 2023 and a kick-off meeting was held in the end of May 2023 in Sežana.

It is funded under the *Policy objective 4* - A more social and inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and the *Specific objective 6* - Enhancing the role of culture and sustainable tourism in economic development, social inclusion and social innovation.

Project OUTPUTS	Project RESULTS
1 Action plan developed jointly	1 Joint action plan adopted by organizations
3 Pilot actions jointly developed and implemented by the project	7 Solutions adopted or enhanced by organizations
200 Participants to cross-border joint training actions	200 Participants completing the joint training programmes
12 Cross-border public events jointly organised	
4 Jointly developed solutions	
	1 Tourist sites/destinations with increased connectivity to cycling routes

The eligible expenditure progress of the project has reached, at the end of September 2024, the 24% of the total budget.

The main outputs have been already implemented, namely:

- For the establishment of the Kras-Carso EGTC a letter of intent was signed;
- A step towards a common solution to make the Kras-Carso cross-border geopark a UNESCO Global Geopark was made by coordinating cross-border

content and preparing a joint cross-border documentation for UNESCO applications;

- As a pilot measure in the field of sustainable mobility, during the summer season was established a hop-on hop-off circular shuttle service between tourist attractions in the area of the Kras-Carso Geopark,
- Organization of common cross-border events in the Kras-Karst cross-border geopark area, namely: Kras-Carso Cross-Border Geopark Week, International Geodiversity Day, 390th anniversary of tourism in Vilenica, The Karst Gmajna Festival, Geocaching, 120 years of the Dimnice Cave, Conference on geotourism and cycling tourism (with OSI Adrioncycleotur),
- For cross-border training courses: numerous training sessions and best practice visits for guides (tourist and cave guides, naturalists), cave managers, operators, young people.

POSEIDONE

The project fosters the sustainable development of the territory on a cross-border scale, is aimed at the functional area of the northern Adriatic Sea, from the city of Chioggia (Italy) to the Slovenian coast. It promotes the enhancement of the natural environment, the protection of biodiversity, the development of green and blue infrastructures in Natura 2000 sites and indirectly contributing to the development of sustainable and slow tourism, also capitalising the results of previous Interreg projects.

The project started in January 2023 and a kick-off meeting was held in mid-June 2023 in Venice.

Project partnership is composed of 12 members (6 Italians and 6 Slovenians) leaded by VeGAL - GAL Venezia Orientale (Local Action Group of East Venice) and by 7 Associated Partners (4 Italians and 3 Slovenians).

Project budget sums up at total 4.375.000 Euro – 3.500.000 Euro ERDF.

It is funded under the *Policy objective 2* – A greener, low-carbon transitioning towards a net zero carbon economy and resilient Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate change mitigation and adaptation and risk prevention and management and *Specific objective 7* – Enhancing protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity,

and green infrastructure, including in urban areas, and reducing all forms of pollution.

Project OUTPUTS	Project RESULTS
1 Strategy developed jointly	1 Joint strategy adopted by organizations
2 Pilot actions jointly developed and implemented by the projects	
50 Participants to cross-border joint actions	

The eligible expenditure progress of the project has reached, at the end of September 2024, the 45% of the total budget.

A number of activities have been already implemented, amongst which:

- the first summer school in Goletta Verde was held;
- a pilot olive grove was established;
- the assessment and monitoring of the conservation status of species and habitats and the mapping of ecosystem services were completed;
- the beach turtle management protocol was prepared and the database of stranded turtles and dolphins created.

Finally, activities are proceeding for the completion of investments (6 completed, 5 ongoing) and pilot actions.

3.2 OSI GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

3.2.1 Roles and responsibilities

The desk analysis allowed to draft the following list of the **roles of the Programme authorities and bodies and their responsibilities**:

Programme authorities and bodies / Projects members	Roles	Responsibilities
<i>Task Force (TF)</i>	Definition of the priorities and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Analysis of the results of 2014-2020 Programme · Analysis of the new regulations

	strategy of the Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Reporting and matching the territories needs ·Selection of Programme priorities and specific objectives ·Approval of the Programme documents and annexes to submit for approval to the EC ·Approval of first implementing procedures for speeding up the Programme initial implementation phase (Invitation and application package for strategic projects) as well as the approval of the Programme Communication Strategy and the Manual of eligibility of expenditures
<i>Monitoring Committee (MC)</i>	Programme decisions and monitoring (CPR Article 40)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Programme adoption ·Approval the methodology and criteria used for the selection of operations, including any changes thereto; ·Tracking and examination of the progress of the Programme implementation and of achievement of milestones and targets of the Programme ·Examination of the OSI progress and implementation of communication and visibility actions; Examination of any issues affecting the performance of the Programme and the measures taken to address these issues.
<i>Managing Authority (MA)</i>	Programme Coordination and Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Programme drafting ·Establish and apply non-discriminatory, transparent criteria and procedures for the selection and financing of the Operations ·Informing the Monitoring Committee and Commission about the financing of Operations and their progress ·Informing the Monitoring Committee and Commission about the communication and visibility actions performed by the Programme
<i>Joint Secretariat (JS)</i>	Support to the MA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Projects assessment ·Assist beneficiaries and partners in the implementation of operations.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Projects back office (check on projects progress reports) management, monitoring and control · Communication manager
<i>Slovenian National Contact Point</i>	Support the SI beneficiaries Cooperate with the Programme WG for Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Assist Slovenian beneficiaries to submit proposals and implement projects · Cooperate for Programme communication activities
<i>Communication Officer</i>	Responsible of Programme communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Programme communication strategy drafting · Communication activities planning · Dissemination of results · Examination and support to the Projects Communication Strategies
<i>Lead Partner (LP)</i>	Coordination of partnership, management of activities, activities performer, project communication coordinator, communication performer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Partnership leading · Project submission, · Partnership representative to the MA, the JS and the MC · Responsible of the partnership communication activities for the Project progress and the dissemination of results · Reporting to the JS, MA, MC and the Commission about the Project progress
<i>Project Partners (PP)</i>	Operation performers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Participation to the Project Steering committee) · Performing assigned Project activities including the communication of the Project progress and dissemination of results

3.2.1 Decision-making process

The main decision-making body for the Programme is the Monitoring Committee. It is chaired by the Managing Authority which steers its functioning but has no right of vote in its decision-making.

The Managing Authority is responsible for the operative implementation of the Programme with the goal to achieve the Programme objectives according to EU

Regulations. It is responsible and acts in the whole territory covered by the Programme, therefore in the whole cross border area.

The Joint secretariat is set up after consultation with the Member States/Programme partners under the responsibility of the Managing Authority. It assists the Managing Authority and the Monitoring Committee in carrying out their respective functions. It also provides information to potential beneficiaries about funding opportunities under the Programme and assists beneficiaries and partners in the implementation of projects.

The bodies and authorities mentioned above represent a vertical decision-making over all the financed projects as all procedures performed by the Managing Authority through the Joint Secretariat are functional to finance the projects. For each project there is also an horizontal decision making process within the project structure, i.e., the actions performed by the project partnership to achieve the set project goals.

Regarding the decision making process within the single Strategic Operation, as set by the invitation letter, the Lead Partner is responsible of the monitoring and control activities for the project, promotes the decisions taken collectively by the project partners, is responsible of the communication firstly to the JS and, if needed, to the MA or the MC, any problem arising in the implementation of project activities.

For this reason, to assure a better decision-making performance, each project established a committee, described in the project proposal and confirmed during the interviews, functional to assure a good progress of projects activities and quality of results. The following table displays the different solutions adopted by each project:

OSI	Body	Role	Function
ADRIONCYCLETOUR	Project Joint Secretariat composed by a representative of each Partner	Management and project progress monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Coordination and implementation of project activities ·Financial management ·Communication management ·Quality management ·Risk management
KRAS - CARSO II	Project Management Board composed by	Review of the project progress and planning next	The LP appoints: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Project Manager, that has the operational responsibility for the implementation of the project.

	a representative of each Partner The LP is be responsible for calling periodic meetings and implementing the agreements	project activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·Communication coordinator, that ensures compliance with the relevant instructions. ·WP leaders will be in charge of the WP implementation. If necessary, WP leaders can organize meetings for activities coordination. The PM will attend the meetings too.
POSEIDONE	Project Steering Committee composed by a representative of each Partner	Review of the project progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ·The LP acts as Project Coordinator, coordinating and managing the implementation and realization phase of the project, appoints within the team a Project Manager and a Financial Manager who ensure that the project activities are carried out correctly and achieve the expected results ·Each activity is leaded by one of the partners, the same applies also to the communication WP

3.2.2 Monitoring procedures and tools

The Programme uses JEMS as information system for the electronic registration, monitoring and storage of data on financed projects. JEMS is a purpose-built monitoring system created by INTERACT in collaboration with the European Cooperation programmes. All data exchanges between project applicants/beneficiaries and the Programme authorities are performed via JEMS. The system allows the management of all project phases, from the submission of proposals to the projects assessment, from the financing decision to the contracting, from the reporting of project activities to the participants' expenses reimbursement requests.

The Lead partner, as set in the OSI subsidy contract, using JEMS has to submit to the Managing Authority a reimbursement request on January 31st and July 31st of each year with a progress report of the performed project activities.

The Lead Partner of each OSI project presents the periodical progress report to the MC.

3.2.3 Progress of the OSI implementation

Summary information regarding the progress of the OSI is provided below, since, as already mentioned in the preamble to this document, this evaluation report concerns strategic operations as a whole and not as single projects.

The following table reports the dates of interest for each OSI

TITLE	Invitation letter	Start date	Approval of the strategic project	Contract	Kick-off meeting	Expected Ending date
ADRIONCYCLETOUR	20/10/2022	01/09/2022	18/01/2023	03/02/2023	16/02/2023	31/08/2025
KRAS-CARSO II	07/12/2022	01/01/2023	26/04/2023	14/06/2023	31/05/2023	01/01/2026
POSEIDONE	07/12/2022	01/01/2023	26/04/2023	07/06/2023	12/06/2023	01/01/2026

As reported before, each of the three projects have, up to date, submitted 3 expenditure reports and 2 of them have been verified.

3.2.4 Joint Actions

The implementation of the activities of the single OSI is in progress, however, the Programme considered it essential that the three projects could also identify areas of cooperation.

This made it possible to lay the foundations for a new joint action for the implementation of a cross-border tourism product by sharing the competences of each project in order to achieve a common goal. The new action was identified as a “special” OSI called **«#movingITA-SLOWly»** promoting the reduction of motor vehicular traffic by encouraging the use of bicycles. The presentation of the concept product took place at the European week of Regions and Cities held in Brussels during October 2023. The Creation of a dedicated communication plan providing digital tools and social campaigns will start in December 2024 and the final targeting for spreading the final joint cross-border product and its results to the public is planned for July 2025.

Furthermore, it was possible to identify new synergies with the Interreg Italy - Croatia Programme by indicating a 2nd Special OSI **«#CROssingITA-SLOWly» - Synergies between(OSI) projects and programmes**. The new project is based on a network of 17 projects - strategic, standard and capitalisation projects - funded by the two Programmes and has set as a main goal the cooperation for sustainable tourism opportunities. Within the framework of the European week of Regions and Cities held in Brussels during October 2024, during the side event ‘EURegionsWeek close to you’, the exchange of experiences and the sharing of new

opportunities between the two Programmes were fostered focusing on three areas: environmental sustainability, cultural exchange, and tourism development. The discussion allowed to point out the following outputs for the 2nd Special OSI to be gained within 2027 by joint actions:

- development of green walks and cycling routes,
- development of joint plans for eco-tourism,
- a docu-film,
- identification of awareness solutions.

3.2.5 Interview outcomes on OSI governance and management

The performed interviews to the MA, JS OSI managers, OSI LP, the Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development of Slovenia, the MC Deputy member for Ministry of Cohesion of Slovenia, produced the following results:

1. The programming and design methods adopted for the OSI by the Task Force made it possible to determine, before the start of the Programme, projects that could be implemented immediately upon approval of the Programme by the European Commission.
2. The Programme decision to adopt and direct all beneficiaries to use budgets based on Simplified Cost Options has made it possible to simplify the administrative and accounting process of expense reporting for many beneficiaries.
3. While ERDF reimbursement functions as in the past (reimbursing directly through the Lead partner), for 2021-27 also the reimbursement of the Italian national contribution is settled through the Lead Partner (Italian and Slovenian) reducing the administrative burden of the Joint Secretariat and the Accounting function. The Accounting function exactly indicates to the LP the share of national funds to be transferred to each Italian partner.
4. All the interviewees (Managing Authority, OSI Managers of the JS, National Authorities and Monitoring Committee members, Lead Partners) agreed that the solutions adopted were fruitful as effectively saved time usually needed for the submission and selection and start-up of the project activities, unlike in the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programmes, where Strategic Projects were selected through time-consuming procedures through open calls therefore using bottom up tools for top down projects.
5. The MA's decision to identify a contact person for each OSI within the Joint Secretariat has enabled the MA to closely and continuously monitor projects without overburdening a single officer.

6. The recommendation to the Lead Partners to invite the JS managers to the meetings of the project steering committees allows the least to constantly monitor the project progress and of any difficulty that may arise in the implementation of the project activities.
7. The support offered by the JS, MA and MC for project governance are effective allowing, to date, to respect the project implementation schedule
8. The possibility to create new cooperative actions between the three OSI and with other Programmes is welcome by the lead partners, though the project funding was not increased.
9. On the other hand, some problems still have to be solved, as many project partners find it difficult to employ their own officers or to initiate sub-contracts before the subsidy contract is signed.

All the interviewees agree that the adopted solutions can be identified as good practices and transferred to other funding programmes.

3.2.6 Survey outcomes

The governance procedures were analysed also through the answers of the Project partners (hereafter named as PP).

19 out of 31 PP responded to the survey and 11 answered that their organization participated to the design of the OSI and to the preliminary and preparatory meetings prior the submission of the Programme to the European Commission. 12 reported that the partnership to which they belong faced some problems during the drafting of the project after receiving the Invitation letter. 9 say that the actions taken by their partnership for project management, coordination and internal communication are working well, while for the others only partially: the major problems reported are due to the coordination between partners and project LP management, the partnerships did not always propose a solution and in some cases, if a solution was shared, not all the partners adopted it.

Only 5 PP were LP or PP in a strategic project in the previous programming periods, 4 of them think the programming, assessment, financing and management procedures between the previous and the current programme period are more efficient.

3.3 EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAMME COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

3.3.1 The Programme communication strategy

As reported by the Programme website “the approach of the Interreg Italy-Slovenia Programme communication and visibility strategy” aims at disseminating the Programme’s contents, ongoing activities and results granting the visibility and public awareness on the EU co-funding.

With regards to financed projects included OSI, the Programme grants an active role in the communication activities implemented via:

- creating a Programme website hosting the project webpages;
- providing a ready-made logo;
- providing guidelines for the visual identity;
- providing guidelines for coordinated social media campaigns;
- organizing targeted communication workshops for the applicants and beneficiaries.

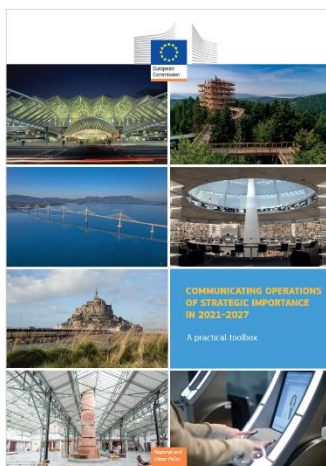
The Programme has its **Communication Officer**, each projects has a communication manager, each OSI, differently from other projects, has also a dedicated reference JS officer.

Project Communication Managers has to link up with the Programme Communication Officer to perform coordinated communication campaigns between projects and Programme. OSI are requested for a special performance on communication and perform a tighter coordination with the Programme structures in terms of quality of actions and frequency of coordination.

A webinar, among others, organised by the Programme to support projects communication activities and visual identity was held on May 30th, 2023 particularly dedicated to OSI. In the Programme website, beside the Guidelines for the application of visual identity, it is available also the European Commission’s Toolbox on Communication dedicated to OSI, *Communicating Operations of Strategic Importance in 2021-2027 – a Practical toolbox*.

3.3.2 OSI visibility as EC Regulatory requirement

Visibility, transparency and communication are key features of a Programme supported by structural funds as set out in Articles 46-50 of REGULATION (EU) 2021/1060 (hereafter *CPR*) and Member States, managing authorities and beneficiaries are responsible at different levels of giving visibility to the EU support of operations “with particular attention to operations of strategic importance”.



The Commission through the INFORM EU group published the document *Communicating Operations of Strategic Importance in 2021-2027 – a Practical toolbox* with the purpose of inspiring “Member States, managing authorities and beneficiaries when communicating about operations of strategic importance”.

The document Toolbox for OSI underlines that the **managing authority** holds an important position by:

- ✓ supporting dedicated communication actions and amplifying messages
- ✓ helping in achieving higher visibility working closely with beneficiaries as a natural communication partner to projects
- ✓ ensuring that communication and visibility material, including at the level of beneficiaries, is made available to the Commission upon request

The Programme document sets to give visibility to the three OSI and to support the organisation of campaigns to disseminate their results.

In fact, the **Programme website** includes a section devoted to the OSI, <https://www.ita-slo.eu/en/progetti/progetti-strategici>. Each OSI has its own specific page to be updated by project communication manager with full information about the OSI.

Each OSI is invited annually **to communicating on OSI progress to the Monitoring Committee**.

During the above mentioned May 30th, 2023 **specific workshop for OSI beneficiaries** attended by more than 70 participants rules and dynamics of project implementation were presented with a special focus on communication and visibility activities.

The Programme and each OSI use **Social Media** (namely Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, LinkedIn). The most used are **Facebook** and **Instagram** for reporting news and events of interest (see next section 3.3.3. below).

In order to give more visibility to the OSI and to show the synergies between them and with other Interreg programmes, the Programme participated/organized the following events.

- European week of Regions and Cities - October 2023 - Brussels, workshop "Green tourism and heritage through strategic projects ADRIANCYCLETOUT, KRAS-CARSO II, POSEIDONE" focused on an innovative cross-border tourism product jointly developed by the three OSI, i.e. "#moving ITA.SLOWly". The focus of the meeting was presenting the three projects with one goal, based on capitalization of outputs, while pursuing Green Deal policies, embedding macro-regional objectives and flagship projects, and innovation lying in the cross-cutting nature of tourism and transport sectors.
- INFORM EU plenary meeting Ostrava, Czechia (14 – 16 November 2023) focused on Data, Transparency and Communication to disseminate at EU level the innovative cross-border tourism product jointly developed by the three OSI, i.e. "#moving ITA.SLOWly".
- EU-Inform Communication Lab - March 19th and 20th 2024 - Nafplio (Greece) - Event among a community of EU Funds communicators. The meeting was attended by representatives of the various programmes and by IT-SI Programme Communication Officer who presented the joint creation of the above-mentioned joint cross-border tourism product "#moving ITA.SLOWly" with a strategic vision beyond the single strategic project. The focus presented was the Programme good practice on how OSI are managed and treated as strategic for the area, e.g. with dedicated information uploaded on the EC platform SFC, with a dedicated Annex 3 to the Programme document and through an active involvement of OSI in Programme events, a tight coordination among OSI and JS on monitoring their activities and communication requirements in particular.
- European week of Regions and Cities - October 2024 - Brussels, side event "#CROSSingITA-SLOWly - 2 programmes cooperating for sustainable tourism opportunities" organised in cooperation with the Interreg Italy-Croatia Programme. It was structured as a participatory workshop involving representatives of 17 projects of Interreg Italy-Slovenia and Interreg Italy-Croatia in addition to Italian, Slovenian and Croatian politicians and representatives of the European Commission. The projects were selected based on their affinity with the theme of the workshop dedicated to sustainable tourism opportunities in the territories between Italy, Slovenia and Croatia and aligned with the Theme 3 namely Smart and Sustainable Growth for Regions of the EURegionsWeek. The workshop was aimed at creating new synergies between the projects of the two programmes and upgrading the

pilot cooperation project #movingITA-SLOWly, which was presented in 2023 and developed by the strategic projects of the Interreg Italy-Slovenia Programme. This innovative cooperation between two Interreg programmes enhances the tourism product #movingITA-SLOWly into #CROssingITA-SLOWly and OSI had an important leverage role in driving together also the other projects around them.

- Inform-EU event - November 2024 - Seville - The experience presented in March (see second bullet point above) brought the Programme to trace a path to this event during which the two strategies, #movingITA-SLOWly and #CROssingITA-SLOWly, were presented as examples of synergies between OSI projects and of OSI projects with programmes in a session named “Unleashing the Power of OSI” dedicated to best practices in communicating operations of strategic importance. The event focused on practical guidance about OSI programming and implementation. 4 experiences of OSI were presented by the Managing Authorities of Lithuania, The Netherlands, Portugal and Interreg Italy-Slovenija. The goal was to lead Managing Authorities to take their OSI to the next level ensuring appropriate visibility, to assess if beneficiaries are organising effective communication events and to identify which support should be offered to beneficiaries for creating good synergies.

In addition, the three OSIs, to give visibility to the synergies they created, organised the following events:

- **Cycling into the future among geo-tourism and cycle-tourism: local enhancement for a responsible tourism** - October 2024 - Duino Castle. ADRIONCYCLETour and KRAS-CARSO II organised together an event focused on cycle tourism, geo-tourism, sustainable tourism and on the enrichment of territories, with the participation of experts of slow travel and cycling destinations / cycling tourism.
- **Cycling Development in the Adriatic-Ionian Area and the Adriancycleroute - States-General of Cycling Mobility in Friuli Venezia Giulia Region** - October 10th, 2024, Udine. The States-General of cycling mobility are foreseen by the FVG regional law n. 8/2018 as an advisory and propositional moment of participation and confrontation between institutions and stakeholders involved in the cycling sector, with the aim of promoting the cycling mobility's culture. During the morning session there were the

interventions of Keji Alex Adunmo - DG Mobility and Transport of the European Commission, focused on European declaration of Cycling and future improvement on cycling in Europe, and from Pierluigi Coppola - EUSAIR Coordinator of Pillar 2 – transport. During Session 3 there was the promotion of the Adrioncycleroute flagship project under the EUSAIR Macrostrategy with the participation of representatives from all the EUSAIR Member States working on cycling.

- **Cross-border consultation as part of the project ADRIONCYCLETour: Cross-border public transport as part of the cycling experience in a tourist destination** - On 28 November 2024 in Villa Vipolže in Brda project partner PRC and LP of Adrioncycletour organized a joint conference on public passenger transport and the establishment of cross-border bus and rail connections and support services for cyclists. There was a panel discussion, focusing in particular on support services for cyclists, cycling infrastructure in the cross-border area and cycling destination management. Participants included representatives of the Slovenian Ministry of Environment, Climate and Energy, the Slovenian Public Transport Management Company, Tourism Bohinj, FVG Region, Promoturismo FVG and the public transport operators: Slovenian Railways, Nomago, TrenItalia/RFI and TPL FVG.
- **Kras-Carso Cross-Border Geopark Week:** Numerous free cross-border events in Slovenia and Italy took place between May 20 and June 5 2024, connecting the entire area of the Classic Karst. The events were organized to celebrate namely: the International Geodiversity Day, the 390th anniversary of tourism in Vilenica, the 120 years of the Dimnice Cave and allowed citizens to participate to Geocaching games, the Karst Gmajna Festival, the Conference on geotourism and cycling tourism (with OSI Adrioncycletour), the Ceremony of the letter of intent establishing the EGTC.

3.3.3 Communication Output indicators

All public events organised and also all those listed above helped to broadcast OSI activities, products and services and Interreg funding as prescribed by EU regulations.

In the following table are reported the main output indicators for communication as set in the Programme document and the achievements fulfilled broadly at Programme level so far and by each of the three OSI:

Indicator	PROGRAMME 15-11-2024 Update	OSI 31-12-2023 Update
Website: number of visits	289.943	n.a. it is not possible to distinguish the number of visits on OSI webpages
Social media: number of followers	2.757	22.923
Social media: number of published contents	877	265
Social media: number of views	163.743	39.769
Social media: number of interactions	35.527	10.168
Public events: number of events organised	26	23
Public events: number of participants	2.771	2.912

3.3.4 Interviews outcomes on OSI communication actions

The performed interviews to the MA, JS OSI managers, OSI LP, the Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development of Slovenia, the MC Deputy member for Ministry of Cohesion of Slovenia, produced the following results:

1. The Programme internal communication actions, as provided for by the regulations and the Commission's indications, were/are fulfilled as follows:
 - a. Communication of the selection of OSI to the European Commission is performed using the SFC portal
 - b. Annual communication of the progress of OSI implementation is provided by the three Lead partners to the Programme Monitoring Committee
 - c. Communication between project partners is ensured during the implementation of project activities thanks to regular meetings between the members of the partnership held by the Lead partner
2. The project Communication Managers regularly compile the project website and post news on social media at least once a week on average, but the frequency of publication depends very much on the news to be disseminated
3. Commission, MA and JS contact persons are invited to public European or local events to give visibility to OSI

3.3.5 Survey outcomes on OSI communication actions

Among the 19 PP that responded to the survey 9 report that the LP provides their organisation with sufficient information on the project progress, while 7 think information is only partially provided.

16 out of the 19 PP are involved in the dissemination of the project and of the project activities results mainly reposting news on social media. Most of the PP consider that communication to other stakeholders and to the general public is sufficient and effective but there is still room for improvement. They report that the improvement could be pursued through:

- a. the use of communication forms better addressed to the target groups;
- b. a better organization of the project website;
- c. more information through social media;
- d. more information through press or online/radio/television news.

Among the 39 citizens that responded to the survey, only 2 have not heard about the Programme and 5 say that have not heard about the OSI. 24 participated to events/workshops and 10 used the services provided by the projects. They consider the following channels as vehicles for a powerful communication:

- ✓ public events and workshops,
- ✓ social media and websites
- ✓ newspaper or magazine articles

- ✓ radio and TV broadcasting.

4. ANSWERING THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1 ANSWERS TO THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS

Along the Evaluation Plan, the Programme identified a set of evaluation questions for each SO. Each Operation of Strategic Importance answers to the evaluation questions for the SO to which it belongs.

*Operation of Strategic Importance: **POSEIDONE***

SO 2.7 - Enhancing protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity, and green infrastructure, including in urban areas, and reducing all forms of pollution

Evaluation question (ref Evaluation Plan)	Answers identified starting from the OSI objectives
Which are the protection and nature preservation, biodiversity and green infrastructure approaches in the approved projects?	The project is aimed to promote local development by favouring the protection of nature and biodiversity, the development of green and blue infrastructures in Natura 2000 sites, the reduction of tourist pressure on natural parks or natural areas, the improvement of the landscape by the promotion of biodiversity in agriculture, the protection of native species and the dissemination of knowledge.
Do they involve urban and rural areas?	No, this project involves natural and unspoiled areas (sea and land).
Which are the developed solutions to be highlighted as good practice?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Common strategy and scenarios for the protection and environment conservation in the area of the Programme,· Identification of good management practices for the enhancement and use of biodiversity,· Ensuring biodiversity conservation and sustainable tourism.

Along the Evaluation Plan, the Programme identified a set of evaluation questions for each SO. Each Operation of Strategic Importance answers to the evaluation questions for the SO to which it belongs.

*Operations of Strategic Importance: **ADRIONCYCLETOUR** and **KRAS-CARSO II***

SO 4.6. - Enhancing the role of culture and sustainable tourism in economic development, social inclusion and social innovation

Evaluation question (ref Evaluation Plan)	Answers identified starting from the OSI objectives
Which are the cultural and sustainable tourism (enhancing economic development, social inclusion and social innovation) approaches in the approved projects?	The two projects promote a sustainable and slow tourism in full compliance with the environmental and historical assets of the area with an integrated approach of sustainable tourism and mobility.
Which are the developed solutions to be highlighted as good practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Solutions crosscutting between the tourism and transport sectors(ADRIONCYCLETOUR) · Solution pursuing main objectives on the joint governance of the geopark (Karst Platou) in establishment (KRAS-CARSO II) · Solutions pursuing objectives on a macro-regional scale (BOTH PROJECTS) · Solutions to raise awareness of the environmental importance for the sustainable development of tourism (BOTH PROJECTS)

Based on the focus of this Thematic Evaluation Report and considering the three operations as a whole, further questions about Governance and Communication actions were considered by the evaluator in the Methodological note for this Report, though not included in the approved Evaluation plan, as follows:

Governance actions

Evaluation question (ref Methodological note)	Answers identified starting from the OSI objectives
Could the planning and management procedures be considered as a good practice?	The new regulatory provision to indicate operations of strategic importance in Appendix 3 with a timetable was an opportunity for the Programme to anticipate the confrontation and discussion with the territories and made it possible to anticipate the selection of strategic operations proposals arisen from the territory and to start the activities of the projects in a very short time after the approval of the Programme, allowing to save about 18 months of time considering evaluation and contracting phases.
Could these be transferred to other	Operations of strategic importance could have an effective impact on territories if they could use much of

European territories and areas and partnership management practices be repeated in other contexts?	the programming period for carrying out their activities. The opportunity arisen by the regulatory provision of indicating the OSI in Appendix 3 to the Programme, was not taken by the most of the Interreg programmes that involve Italy or Slovenia. The programming and management of the OSI, with good reason, can be considered a good practice that can be transferred to other contexts.
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Communication actions

Evaluation question (ref Methodological note)	Answers identified starting from the OSI objectives
Question	Answer
Were the communication actions effective?	The number of public events (49 as a total) and of participants (5.683) can be considered an excellent result, taking into account that the projects progress has not yet reached the mid-term and that the projects outputs and products are scheduled to be delivered in two years' time.
Did these actions facilitate interest for synergies with other territories and cooperation actions with other Programmes/macoregional strategies?	Actions carried out allowed to organise the event “#CROSSINGITA-SLOWLY - 2 programmes cooperating for sustainable tourism opportunities” organised in cooperation with the Interreg Italy-Croatia Programme and was structured as a participatory workshop involving representatives of 17 Interreg Italy-Slovenia and Interreg Italy-Croatia projects
Did these actions reach and at what degree the citizens?	Results of the citizens' survey accomplish the fact that the communication actions reached their target, though the PP survey reveals the feeling of the partnerships members that there is room for improvement in reaching the project audience using communication forms better targeted

4.2 CONCLUSIONS

The **first outcome** of this thematic evaluation is that the OSI selected by the IT-SI Programme accomplish the definition of operations that give a 'significant contribution' to the Programme and have characteristics that allow them to meet the definition of "operations of strategic importance" as provided for by the regulations, due to:

- ✓ Their systemic nature as without their contribution the Programme Specific Objectives could be only partially achieved;
- ✓ The innovative character in terms of public policies, reference framework, etc.;
- ✓ The strategic nature recognized for the local economy and the territorial ecosystem;
- ✓ The projects specific character that gathers the contribution for the activities implementation of many of the most significant actors in the area and, for this reason the limited number of funded strategic operations is justified;
- ✓ The high number of final recipients impacted by the actions carried out;
- ✓ Their financial dimension.

A **second output** is that the programming and design methods adopted for the OSI by the Task Force made it possible to determine, before the start of the Programme, projects that could be implemented immediately upon approval of the Programme by the Commission. The solutions adopted were fruitful as effectively saved time usually needed for the submission and selection and start-up of the project activities, unlike in the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programmes, where Strategic Projects were selected through time-consuming procedures through open calls therefore using bottom up tools for top down. Furthermore, comparing to other Interreg programmes of the 2021-2027 programming period where Italy or Slovenia are involved, the solution adopted to fully define the Operations of Strategic Importance before the Programme submission is a unique case.

A **third output**, that is shared among all funded projects, is the Programme decision to adopt and direct all beneficiaries to use budgets based on Simplified Cost Options has made it possible to simplify the administrative and accounting process of expense reporting for many beneficiaries. Furthermore, the choice of the MA to settle claims for reimbursement only to the Lead Partners of the partnerships has made it possible to share part of the administrative burden of the Joint Secretariat and the Accounting Function with the Lead Partners. As the OSI have a large partnership the simplification of expenses reports and the reduction of reimbursement payments, comparing to the previous programming period, has a positive impact on the project administration.



A **fourth output** is the accomplishment of the list of suggestions that the Toolbox for OSI provides to the managing authorities for activities useful in supporting projects for their

visibility and communication, it is possible to verify the activities carried out by the IT-SI Managing Authority for the OSI beneficiaries and check out if there could be areas that the Programme could still cover or improve its efforts in helping out the beneficiaries.

Toolbox Suggestions	Actions carried out by the IT-SI Programme
Introduce beneficiaries to their responsibilities and commitments before implementation starts	Visual Identity workshop held on December 2022
Suggest tailored communication events	Specific workshop for OSI beneficiaries held on May 2023
Educate and support beneficiaries regarding their obligations	Visual Identity workshop held on December 2022
Organize webinars and training for beneficiaries of operations of strategic importance	Specific workshop for OSI beneficiaries held on May 2023
Engage external communication specialist or agencies to provide tailored support to communication of OSI	The project partnerships have among their members communication agencies
Support beneficiaries in media relations	Dissemination on social media channels workshop held on July 2024
Work with beneficiaries in communicating team up and produce project videos podcasts and other audio-visual materials	The project partnerships have among their members communication agencies



The same document points out that there is a variety of communication approaches that Member States and managing authorities are setting up for operations of strategic importance and similar types of projects, as well as a number of proven actions that are suggested for communication. Also in this case it is possible to verify the activities carried out by the IT-SI Managing Authority

for the OSI and check out if there could be areas that the Programme could still cover or improve its efforts in enhancing OSI visibility:

Toolbox Suggested communication approach	IT -SI Programme performed actions
Programme website and single website portal	Programme website hosting the projects webpages
Dissemination of results and output through media events and videos	Participation to the EU events and hosting local events in the Programme area
Common requirements for the three projects	Specific workshop for OSI beneficiaries held on May 2023
Catalogue of events	The list of events is online published on the project webpages
Social media strategy	Dissemination on social media channels workshop held on July 2024
Mainstream communication	Visibility in each Programme event Joint promotion at European level
Synergies	Two Special OSI: #movingITA-SLOWly and #CROSSingITA-SLOWly -Synergies between(OSI) projects and programmes
Supporting and educating to communication and visibility	Specific workshop for OSI beneficiaries held on May 2023
Clear and more inclusive communication	Trilingual communication (IT-SI-ENG) Use of social channels (youtube...) Programme events organised taking into account accessibility and equal participation.
Media coverage	Website and social media

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Analysing the answers provide during the interviews and to two surveys addressed to the Project Partners and to the Citizens it is possible to outline the following recommendations to be taken into account by the Programme.

OSI governance and management

As pointed out in the interviews, public bodies, that are the most of the project partners, find it difficult to appoint and employ their own officers or to initiate sub-contracts before the subsidy contract is signed.

It would be advisable for the Programme, should it intend to finance OSI also in a future programming period, to find a solution that would allow the beneficiaries who have this issue to start at least part of the activities before the subsidy contract is signed.

The survey for PP pointed out that for the projects actions taken by the OSI partnerships for project management, coordination and internal communication can be improved supporting the coordination between partners and project management.

The request by the MA to invite the JS officers to the project steering committee meetings, is a good solution that has to be implemented and maintained constantly by the LP. This should allow the partnerships members to express any problem that impairs the proper management of the project and to share practical solutions with the other partners and the JS officer, by his experience, could be able to offer solutions adopted by other OSI or projects.

Communication strategy

The survey for PP pointed out that for the projects there is still work to do in terms of:

- a. dissemination through press or online/radio/television news;
- b. sharing more information through social media;
- c. better addressing the communication to the target groups;
- d. better organizing the project website.

The first two points are debatable, given the values obtained by the three projects and the Programme in terms of number of users/visitors and interactions with the news published/broadcasted and number of attendees in major public events.

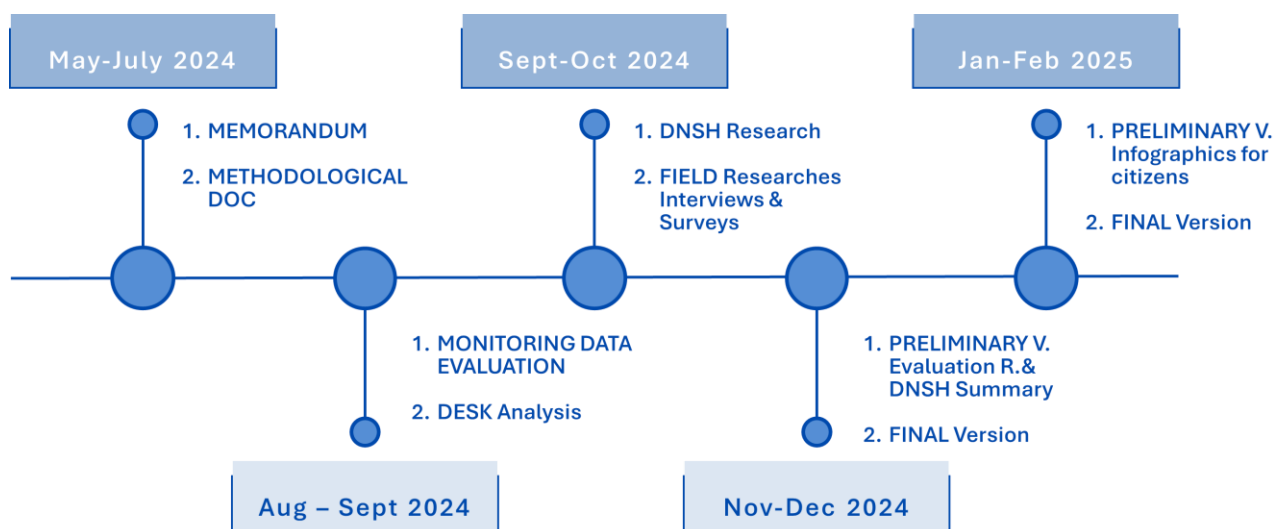
However, the next two comments should be taken into consideration and lead the Programme to:

- Verify if the communication actions carried out by the Programme or the projects leave unreached target groups and set up suitable corrective actions,
- Take into consideration to undergo to a revision of the organization of the projects website.

6. WORKING GROUP COMPOSITION AND CONTRIBUTION OF EACH COMPONENT

Function	Resources involved	Tasks/ activities
SENIOR Expert	Marina De Nigris	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination of the Working Group; • Interaction with the MA; • Scientific supervision of Working Group activities and products released.
JUNIOR Expert	Emiliano Bona	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparatory activities for the required products: Desk analysis, Relevant stakeholders mapping, Analysis of monitoring data, Interviews and surveys online; • Drafting of the evaluation report.
JUNIOR Expert	Mariia Iliasova	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparatory activities for the required products, infographics design; • Monitoring of environmental aspects and sustainable development objectives including integration of the DNSH principle; specifically, verification of compatibility of projects with environmental objectives under Regulation (EU) 2020/852 concerning environmentally sustainable economic activities; • Drafting of executive summary on the Do No Significant Harm (DNSH) principle for the report.
Additional expert	Antonella Bertolotti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparatory activities for the required products: Desk analysis, Relevant stakeholders mapping, Analysis of monitoring data, Interviews and online surveys; • Supporting the drafting of evaluation reports and related summaries.
Additional expert	Anuska Stoka	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting Field Researches.

7. EVALUATION PHASES AND TIMING



8. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



The evaluation activity of the INTERREG VI A Italia-Slovenija 2021-2027 is performed as required by the Evaluation Plan, approved by the Monitoring Committee of the Programme on May 15th, 2023 and updated on October 2nd, 2024.

This report is drafted following the methodological note shared with the WG and approved by the Managing Authority (there after MA) on July 23rd, 2024 and presents all the information and data gathered and analysed by the evaluator in order to answer to the evaluation questions set for the Operations of Strategic Importance.

The Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 defines in Article 2 an ‘Operation of strategic importance’ as “an operation which provides a significant contribution to the achievement of the objectives of a programme and which is subject to particular monitoring and communication measures”.

Following this definition, the Programme and its Appendix 3 on Operations for Strategic importance identified three projects, namely: Adrioncycletour, Poseidone, KRAS-Carso II. The three OSI are described by providing the main objective of each operation, the Lead Partner, the duration, timetable and ERDF budget. There is also a more detailed Programme annex that contains the indicative activities and the relevant partnership (including the Lead partner, Project partners and associated partners).

Each project budget sums up at total 4.375.000 Euro – 3.500.000 Euro ERDF and started between September 2022 and January 2023 and the expected duration is 36 months.

Soon after the Commission's Programme approval (August, 3rd 2022), upon approval of the IT-SI Programme Monitoring Committee (following previous decisions and agreements by the Task Force), an Invitation Letter was sent to each Lead Partner of the OSI. The Letter and its enclosed package of documents were structured as a guide for the project drafting. The Projects Application form underwent to a formal and administrative check, and eligibility assessment and a quality assessment performed by a committee composed of members of the Joint Secretariat and the coordinator of the JS.

The eligible expenditure progress of the projects has reached, at the end of September 2024, values between the 20% and 45% of the total budget. Most of the infrastructural activities have started or will start by the end of 2024 and these will accelerate the expenditure progress.

The desk analysis allowed to draft the following list of the roles of the Programme authorities and bodies and their responsibilities:

- ✓ Task Force (TF), defines of the priorities and strategy of the Programme
- ✓ Monitoring Committee (MC), performs Programme decisions and monitoring (CPR Article 40)
- ✓ Managing Authority (MA), performs Programme Coordination and Management
- ✓ Joint Secretariat (JS), supports the MA
- ✓ Slovenian National Contact Point, supports the Slovenian beneficiaries and cooperates with the Programme WG for Communication
- ✓ Communication Officer, is the responsible of Programme communication
- ✓ Lead Partner (LP), coordinates the partnership, performs the management of activities, is the project communication coordinator
- ✓ Project Partners (PP) are operation performers

The main decision-making body for the Programme is the MC chaired by the MA which steers its functioning but has no right of vote in its decision-making.

The MA is responsible for the operative implementation of the Programme with the goal to achieve the Programme objectives according to EU Regulations. It is responsible and acts in the whole territory covered by the Programme, therefore in the whole cross border area.

The Joint secretariat assists the MA and the MC in carrying out their respective functions. It also provides information to potential beneficiaries about funding opportunities under the Programme and assists beneficiaries and partners in the implementation of projects.

The decision making process within the single OSI sets that the LP is responsible of the monitoring and control activities for the project, promotes the decisions taken collectively by the project partners, is responsible of the communication firstly to the JS and, if needed, to the MA or the MC, any problem arising in the implementation of project activities.

For this reason, to assure a better decision-making performance, each project established a committee as described in the project proposal.

The Programme uses JEMS as information system for the electronic registration, monitoring and storage of data on financed projects. The LP using JEMS has to submit to the Managing Authority a reimbursement request on January 31st and July 31st of each year with a progress report of the performed project activities.

The LP of each OSI project presents the periodical progress report to the MC.

The implementation of the activities of the single OSI is in progress, however, the Programme considered it essential that the three projects could also identify areas of cooperation and this made it possible to lay the foundations for a two new joint actions: among the three OSI «#movingITA-SLOWly» and with the INTERREG ITALY-CROATIA Programme «#CROssingITA-SLOWly».

The Programme has its Communication Officer, and Project communication managers have to link up with the Programme Communication Officer to perform coordinated communication campaigns between projects and Programme.

The Programme communication strategy sets to give visibility to the three OSI and to support the organisation of campaigns to disseminate their results. In fact, the Programme website includes a section devoted to the OSI and each OSI has its own specific page to be updated by the project communication.

Each OSI is invited annually to communicate on OSI progress to the Monitoring Committee.

The Programme and each OSI use Social Media, particularly Facebook and Instagram, for reporting news and events of interest.

In order to give more visibility to the OSI and to show the synergies between them and with other Interreg programmes, the Programme participated/organized 5 events. In addition, the three OSIs, to give visibility to the synergies they created, organised 4 events.

Desk and field analysis performed by the evaluator, allowed to answer positively to the evaluation questions set in the Evaluation plan for the Programme Specific Objective to which it belongs.

POSEIDONE

SO 2.7 - Enhancing protection and preservation of nature, biodiversity, and green infrastructure, including in urban areas, and reducing all forms of pollution

Evaluation question (ref Evaluation Plan)	Answers identified starting from the OSI objectives
Which are the protection and nature preservation, biodiversity and green infrastructure approaches in the approved projects?	The project is aimed to promote local development by favouring the protection of nature and biodiversity, the development of green and blue infrastructures in Natura 2000 sites, the reduction of tourist pressure on natural parks or natural areas, the improvement of the landscape by the promotion of biodiversity in agriculture, the protection of native species and the dissemination of knowledge.
Do they involve urban and rural areas?	No, this project involves natural and unspoiled areas (sea and land).
Which are the developed solutions to be highlighted as good practice?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Common strategy and scenarios for the protection and environment conservation in the area of the Programme, · Identification of good management practices for the enhancement and use of biodiversity, · Ensuring biodiversity conservation and sustainable tourism.

ADRIONCYCLETOUR and KRAS-CARSO II

SO 4.6. - Enhancing the role of culture and sustainable tourism in economic development, social inclusion and social innovation

Evaluation question (ref Evaluation Plan)	Answers identified starting from the OSI objectives
Which are the cultural and sustainable tourism (enhancing economic development, social inclusion and social innovation) approaches in the approved projects?	The two projects promote a sustainable and slow tourism in full compliance with the environmental and historical assets of the area with an integrated approach of sustainable tourism and mobility.
Which are the developed solutions to be highlighted as good practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Solutions crosscutting between the tourism and transport sectors(ADRIONCYCLETOUR) · Solution pursuing main objectives on the joint governance of the geopark (Karst Platou) in establishment (KRAS-CARSO II) · Solutions pursuing objectives on a macro-regional scale (BOTH PROJECTS)

	· Solutions to raise awareness of the environmental importance for the sustainable development of tourism (BOTH PROJECTS)
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Based on the focus of this Thematic Evaluation Report and considering the three operations as a whole, further questions about Governance and Communication actions were considered by the evaluator in the Methodological note for this Report, though not included in the approved Evaluation plan, as follows:

Governance actions

Evaluation question (ref Methodological note)	Answers identified starting from the OSI objectives
Could the planning and management procedures be considered as a good practice?	The new regulatory provision to indicate operations of strategic importance in Appendix 3 with a timetable was an opportunity for the Programme to anticipate the confrontation and discussion with the territories and made it possible to anticipate the selection of strategic operations proposals arisen from the territory and to start the activities of the projects in a very short time after the approval of the Programme, allowing to save about 18 months of time considering evaluation and contracting phases.
Could these be transferred to other European territories and areas and partnership management practices be repeated in other contexts?	Operations of strategic importance could have an effective impact on territories if they could use much of the programming period for carrying out their activities. The opportunity arisen by the regulatory provision of indicating the OSI in Appendix 3 to the Programme, was not taken by the most of the Interreg programmes that involve Italy or Slovenia. The programming and management of the OSI, with good reason, can be considered a good practice that can be transferred to other contexts.

Communication actions

Evaluation question (ref Methodological note)	Answers identified starting from the OSI objectives
Question	Answer
Were the communication actions effective?	The number of public events (49 as a total) and of participants (5.683) can be considered an excellent result, taking into account that the projects progress has not yet reached the mid-term and that the projects outputs and products are scheduled to be delivered in two years' time.
Did these actions facilitate interest for synergies with other territories and cooperation actions with	Actions carried out allowed to organise the event "#CROSSINGITA-SLOWLY - 2 programmes cooperating for sustainable tourism opportunities" organised in cooperation with the Interreg Italy-Croatia Programme and was structured

other Programmes/macroeconomic strategies?	as a participatory workshop involving representatives of 17 Interreg Italy-Slovenia and Interreg Italy-Croatia projects
Did these actions reach and at what degree the citizens?	Results of the citizens' survey accomplish the fact that the communication actions reached their target, though the PP survey reveals the feeling of the partnerships members that there is room for improvement in reaching the project audience using communication forms better targeted

The conclusions report the following outcomes of this first thematic evaluation:

1. the OSI selected by the IT-SI Programme accomplish the definition of "operations of strategic importance" as provided for by the regulations;
2. the programming and design methods adopted for the OSI by the Task Force made it possible to determine, before the start of the Programme, projects that could be implemented immediately upon approval of the Programme by the Commission;
3. the Programme decision to adopt and direct all beneficiaries to use budgets based on Simplified Cost Options (as done for all funded projects), has made it possible to simplify the administrative and accounting process of expense reporting for many beneficiaries;
4. accomplishment of the list of suggestions that the Toolbox for OSI provides for activities useful in supporting projects for their visibility and communication and the MA adoption of communication approaches for the OSI visibility.

Analysing the answers received during the interviews and from the two surveys addressed to the Project Partners and to the Citizens, the following recommendations can be addressed to the Programme:

- It would be advisable for the Programme, should it intend to finance OSI also in a future programming period, to find a solution that would allow those project partners that find it difficult to employ their own officers or to initiate sub-contracts before the subsidy contract is signed, to start at least part of the activities before the signing of the subsidy contract.
- The request by the MA to invite the JS officers to the project steering committee meetings, is a good solution that has to be implemented and maintained constantly by the LP. This should allow the partnerships members to express any problem that impairs the proper management of the project and to share practical solutions with the other partners and the JS officer, by his experience, could be able to offer solutions adopted by other OSI or projects.

- Verify if the communication actions carried out by the Programme or the projects leave unreached target groups and set up suitable corrective actions,
- Take into consideration to undergo to a revision of the organization of the projects website.