

PERFORMANCE EVALUATION OF THE ESTONIA-LATVIA PROGRAMME



Interreg
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SAFEGE Baltija, Ltd & Comperio, Ltd
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This evaluation focusses upon communication activities implemented under the Estonia-Latvia cross-border cooperation Programme in 2014 -2020 period. The Programme aims at strengthening cooperation among regions across the borders of Estonia and Latvia via activities organised under seven specific objectives and five priority axes in areas of business promotion, living environment, maritime traffic and labour market.

The key audience for the communication activities are the potential applicants and beneficiaries: national, regional and local authorities, public equivalent bodies, private companies, education and research institutions, business support institutions and non-governmental organisations within the eligible area of the Programme.

The main task of the evaluation is to assess, whether the Communication Strategy of the Programme has been implemented in an effective way and highlight any areas for improvement.

Since 2015 the Programme has reached over 39 thousand persons in Latvia and Estonia through the web page. 5,2% of the reached persons have participated in various events organised by the Programme and 4,3% follow the Programme on Facebook. 1,3% of those reached have submitted project ideas and 0,58% have become beneficiaries. The Programme has reached proportionally similar number of persons in Estonia and Latvia, however, persons and organisations from Latvia have participated more actively in communication activities.

How effective has been communication?

The Programme and work of the JS is perceived positively among the potential and current beneficiaries. All methods of communication (events, social media, website, publications, direct communication) have received high average scores (above 4 or close to it) regarding their usability, accuracy, relevance and timing. In particular,

- The website www.estlat.eu is seen as the main source of useful and accurate information. It has acquired 292 912 views made by 37 878 users. The beneficiaries are satisfied with the access to documents, but some of the first-time site visitors struggle to find necessary information;
- 33 events organised by the JS have attracted 2032 persons, including 1415 participants of specific Programme events and 617 participants of the European Co-operation days. However, there seem to be different expectations from the perspective of more vs. less experienced organisations. While more experienced seek information on rules and requirements, those with less experience look for inspiration, partners and overall understanding of the Programme;
- Facebook page of the Programme has one of the highest number of followers (1664) if compared to similar programmes. However, the reach of the Programme seems to be lower than average. Also the interviewed persons and almost 40% of the respondents acknowledged that they did not follow the Facebook page, which might indicate, that the page mainly serves as a source of inspiration;
- The most successful publications and promotional materials are considered the short infographic style extracts about the rules of the Programme and project stories. The overall rating of the Programme documents is “4”, which confirms, that these documents are considered as clear and user friendly;
- There is an overall consent among the interviewed persons that direct communication via emails is very useful, non-disturbing and sufficient, particularly, due to their busy schedules.

In general it may be concluded that communication activities implemented under the Programme have reached the target groups in effective way, as demonstrated by statistics and the number of applications submitted, and comments expressed during the interviews and survey.

How effective have been consultations?

Consultations during the application period are valued more favorably by the successful applicants. Those whose ideas were not supported often are left wondering and waiting for more detailed explanation. Better explanation could encourage them to submit improved project ideas for the next call. The beneficiaries would appreciate consultations via instant messaging tools (e.g., Skype, WhatsApp).

The main concerns of the beneficiaries during the implementation period are the perceived discrepancies in interpretation of the requirements by the Financial Controllers and information provided during the seminars. This needs to be addressed to avoid further escalation of the negative feedback. Perceived differences between the reporting requirements for Latvian and Estonian based organisations should also be further investigated.

Has the Programme reached the target groups?

Programme's audience in Latvia has been reached to a larger extent than in Estonia, e.g. participants of the events, Facebook followers from Latvian organisations have been more active in submitting project ideas as the lead partners. Interviews confirmed that the target groups have mainly been reached by direct communication - via emails and umbrella organisations. The low participation of NGOs in events organised by the JS could be a reason to reassess methods used to reach them or evaluate limitations for NGOs to participate in events (e.g. location of events).

While reaching more potential beneficiaries could generate more ideas, this does not guarantee more qualitative projects, since higher number of Latvian lead project ideas does not lead to higher number of approved projects.

What are the limitations to participate in the Programme?

The main limiting reasons include requirements to pre-finance the projects, to establish a cross-border partnership, to possess the English language skills and ability to navigate the documentation. These issues could only indirectly be solved via communication means, e.g., the JS could provide extracts of information both in Estonian and Latvian languages, facilitate partner search events or promote the existing partner search tool on the Programme's website.

Future challenges

Communication on Programme's and projects results is crucial to provide information to the decision makers in order to support continuation of the Programme in the next planning period. This primarily could be achieved via communication on benefits with wider and more strategic impact via mass media and other means. This information flow should be lead by the beneficiaries and strengthened by the JS efforts. Therefore additional activities (e.g. training, information sharing platforms) should be implemented to support the beneficiaries. These efforts should facilitate achievement of the Communication objective 2.1. and 2.2.

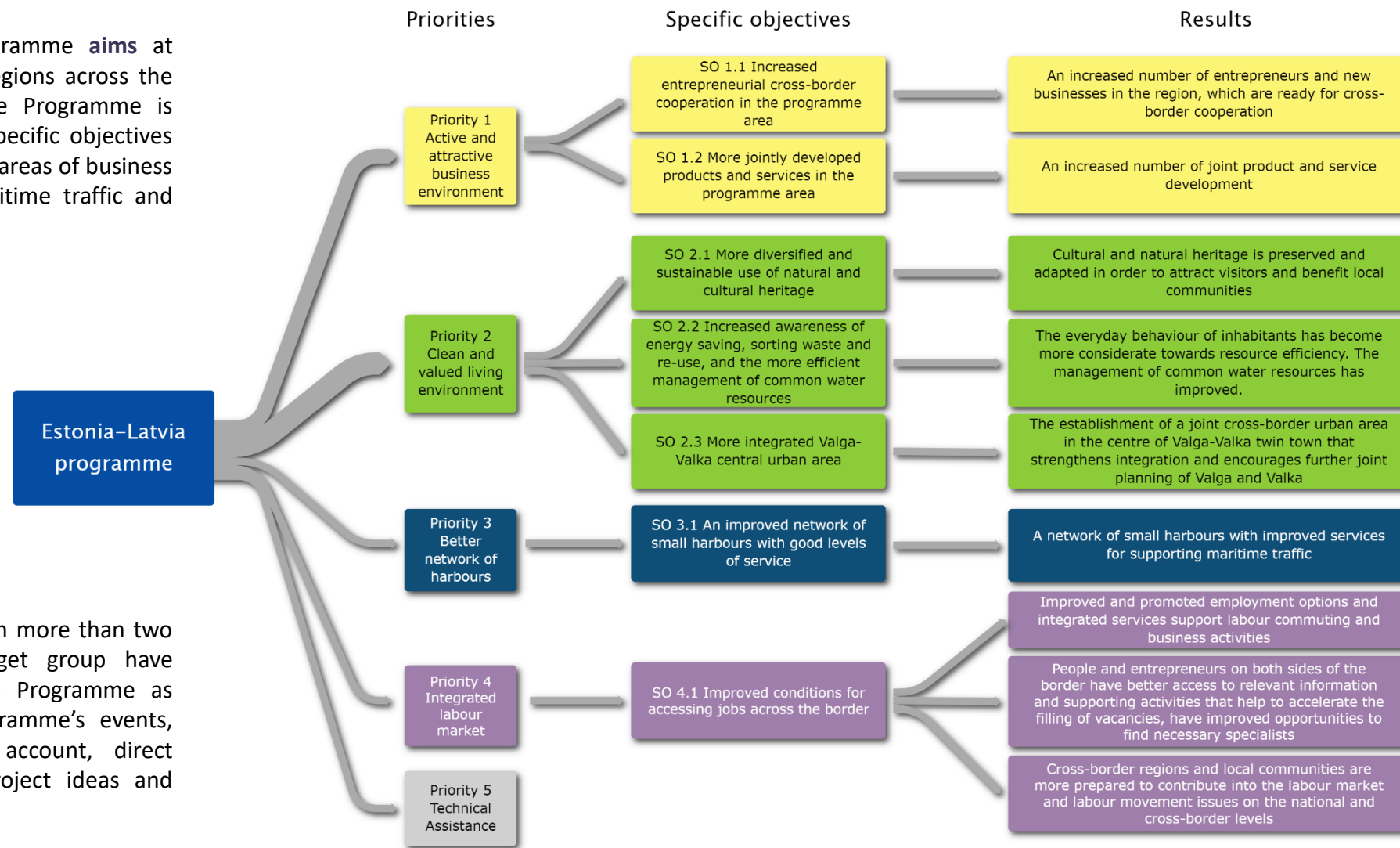
Also, technical improvements might include live streaming on Facebook of the events organised by the JS, publishing questions and answers from seminars on the Programme's website, boosting posts on Facebook, strengthening direct communication through umbrella organisations and direct emails.

I INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Interreg V-A – Estonia–Latvia Programme **aims** at strengthening cooperation among regions across the borders of Estonia and Latvia. The Programme is targeted at achievement of seven specific objectives organized among five priority axes in areas of business promotion, living environment, maritime traffic and labor market.

The **target audience** of the Programme are inhabitants of the Programme area (approx. 2 million people). The main **target groups** (potential beneficiaries) are private enterprises, local and regional authorities, state authorities, NGO's, and public equivalent bodies (mainly education and research institutions, foundations and public limited companies).

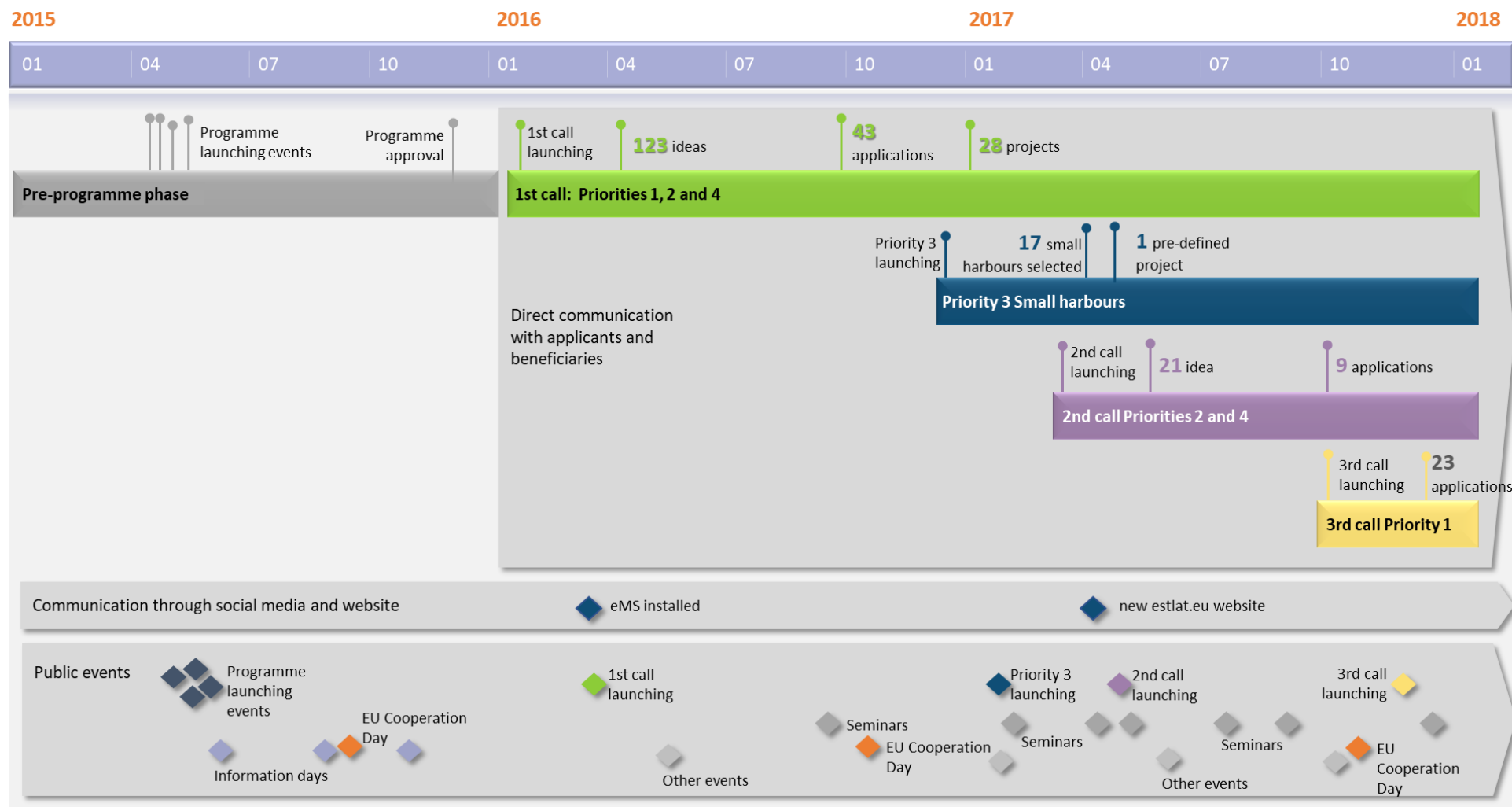
By the kick off date of the evaluation more than two thousand members from the target group have demonstrated their interest in the Programme as evidenced by participation in Programme's events, following Programme's Facebook account, direct contacts with the JS, submitted project ideas and signed contracts (see chapter 5.1).



Picture 1: Programme intervention logic . Source: Programme manual.

Programme's communication activities started already in Spring 2015, before the official approval of the Programme with series of launching events, other events and communication through social media and the Programme's website. Officially the Programme commenced on December 2015 when it was approved by the EC.

Main **communication means** are Programme's website, social media (Facebook), public events and direct communication. By the cut-off date of this evaluation, implementation of 28 projects approved under the 1st Call and the predefined project under the Priority 3 have started. Assessment of 9 applications submitted under the 2nd Call and 23 applications submitted under the 3rd Call is ongoing.



Picture 2: Programme's timeline and main communication activities. Source: prepared by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», 2017

II EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The **main task** of the current evaluation is to assess, whether the communication strategy of the Programme has been implemented in an effective way supporting further implementation of the Programme and highlighting any areas for improvement. **Evaluation focus** has been set on performance assessment of communication activities towards implementation of the Programme's Communication Strategy.

The **Communication Strategy** of the Programme aims at raising the general awareness on cross border cooperation and Programme's funding opportunities in Estonia and Latvia. The Communication strategy has following objectives:

Objective 1. Quality applications for cross-border cooperation (CBC) projects are received and implemented

CO 1.1 Potential applicants are aware about the funding opportunities and quality project ideas are submitted

CO 1.2 Project partners implement projects at high quality (both technically and content wise)

CO 1.3 Internal information flow between programme institutions is well functioning

Objective 2. Awareness about the EU-funded cross-border cooperation in Estonia and Latvia increases

CO 2.1 Project partners have the capacity to communicate with target audiences (2017-2020)

CO 2.2 Achievements of cross-border cooperation projects and the programme are visible (2015 – 2021)

The evaluation questions are primarily targeted at the Programme's performance related to the Objective 1. Nonetheless, the report indicates progress also towards achievement of the Objective 2.

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach to answer a set of evaluation questions. Below are the key data sources utilized to answer each evaluation question.

Evaluation question	Document analysis	Web based survey	Expert interviews
Has the programme reached the target groups? Was/is the communication sufficient, appropriate and timely? What obstacles the programme encountered with reaching the target group? What were the limitations for applicants for not participating in the programme (submitting the idea form)?			
How effective have been the public events of the programme (information about, quality, location, content)			
How useful and relevant are the webpage, publications and promotional materials (relevance, volumes, quality, up to date etc.)			
Outreach in social media (the presence, attractiveness, relevance etc).			
Consultations and communication. How helpful and effective were the consultations: received information and the way it was communicated			
Evaluation of the documents: how easy to read and understand, how timely provided, the volume of the documents to follow, etc.			

n=123

n=16

III HOW EFFECTIVE HAS BEEN COMMUNICATION?

3.1. General remarks

Results from the Interviews

There is a definite consent among all surveyed groups that the JS provides excellent communication with the audience. During the interviews with the beneficiaries in Latvia there were overall positive remarks provided, with a particular emphasis upon *professional, responsive, neutral, supportive* and *unobtrusive* manner of communication.

The overall positive attitude is also supported by the interviewed beneficiaries from Estonia: *“Communication with the JS is very good, the team is always very professional and supportive, they are trying to provide all help and support and to anticipate possible issues. Consider them very proactive”, “Communication with the Secretariat is satisfactory and supportive as we have received answers to all our questions.»*

Another positive aspect pointed out was the flexibility of the Programme regarding communication activities implemented by the beneficiaries. The beneficiaries appreciate the communication guidelines of the Programme, which support use of flexible and contemporary communication means (e.g., video materials, hackathon).

Results of the Survey

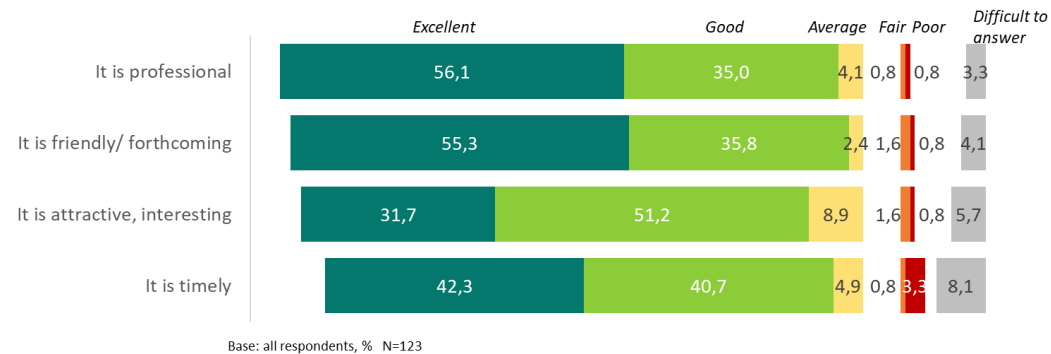
Most of the surveyed respondents¹ also agreed with the opinions shared by the interviewed beneficiaries, as they rated communication with grades “5” and “4” (See Picture 3). One of the respondents summed up the overall rating: *“I am fully satisfied with the communication. [...]. I put “excellent” for all choices about the communication. “*

The overall grades received are high: “It is professional” – 4,5, “It is friendly, forthcoming” – 4,49, “It is timely” – 4,28, “It is attractive, interesting” – 4,18.

On the other hand, there were few respondents, who rated communication with grades 1-3. This rating was supported with the opinion, that communication activities provided within the Programme were *friendly, professional* and *timely*, but emphasis was too much upon the legal aspects, which eliminated possibility for content related discussions. This is considered particularly problematic by the SMEs.

¹ Online survey of the project lead partners and partners (hereafter referred as Beneficiaries), contact persons of ideas and projects that were not supported (hereafter referred as Rejected) and other persons who have been in contact with the JS (hereafter referred as Others).

Picture 3: How would you characterise overall communication style provided by the JS?



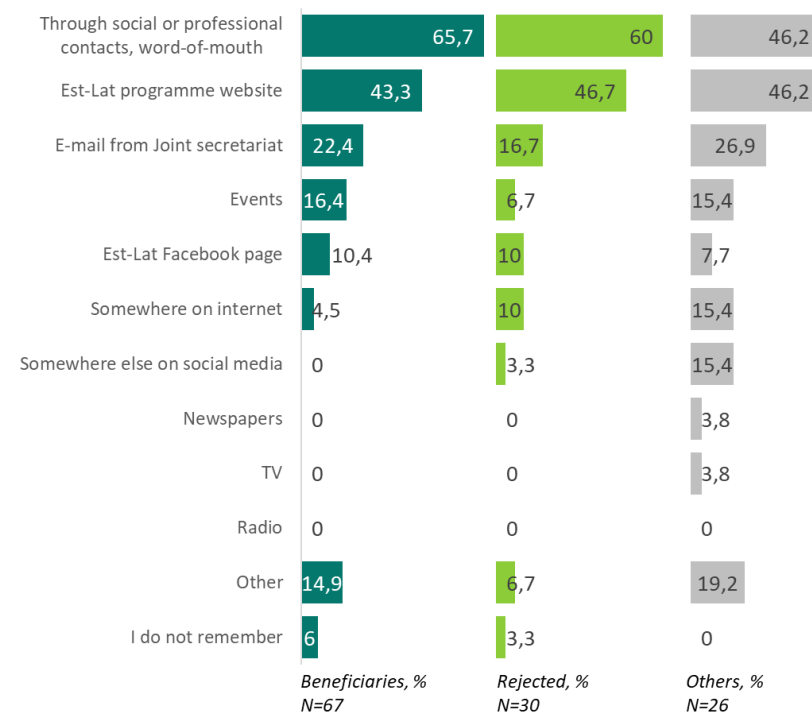
Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

Specific efforts are needed to access the entrepreneurs: “*Entrepreneurs do not even see this Programme as something they could participate in. Entrepreneurs want a personal approach and sometimes want that someone else writes the project proposal for them. You can not reach them all,*” umbrella organisation (Latvia). Therefore direct contacts would be more relevant in case of entrepreneurs: “*I have no time to follow Facebook, I am not there. I will not visit Programme website,*” stated the Beneficiary (Entrepreneur, Latvia), who received direct information from the Tourism Information Centre.

The planning regions (Latvia) could serve as the umbrella organisations in order to reach the potential beneficiaries, since they are directly involved in Programme management and they have direct contacts with the eligible beneficiaries. Close communication with the JS is seen as particularly valuable by the planning regions.

The largest number of the respondents confirmed that they had received information about the Programme through social or professional contacts (See Picture 4) or an e-mail from the JS. The Programme’s website is also an important source of information. Emails from the JS, information on the internet or on social media play more significant role for the group «Others» than for the «Beneficiaries» and «Rejected». Another source of information mentioned was knowledge of the Programme from the previous implementation period.

Picture 4: How did you find out about the EstLat Programme?



Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

Conclusions

- Both interviews and survey results show that the Programme and the JS are perceived positively among the potential and current beneficiaries, and their partner organisations.
- Considering that the target audience of the Programme is limited and recognizable (e.g., municipalities, NGOs operating in the priority areas, planning regions, national institutions, educational institutions and entrepreneurs) it is recommended to continue communication via established co-operation networks and umbrella organisations in the future.

3.2. Public events

There have been 33 events organised by the JS in the period from January 2015 till November 2017. Among them were also three European Cooperation days and 30 events directly related to the Programme. 16 of these events took place in Latvia, and 14 in Estonia, thus equal opportunities for partners from both countries were ensured.

These events have attracted 2032 persons², including 1415 participants of specific Programme events and 617 participants of European Co-operation days. Following the European Co-operation days (with approx. 200 participants each), the most visited event has been the 1st Call launching event in Rūjiena (149 participants), followed by the launching event on heritage tourism in Mazsalaca (89 participants) and Information Day for Latvian entrepreneurs in Riga (85 participants). Notably – all three most visited events took place in Latvia. To some extent it could be explained by the fact that the Programme covers larger territory in Latvia than in Estonia. Also, it should be noted that Riga is the largest city in Latvia with the largest number of potential beneficiaries - enterprises, NGOs and Education and research institutions.

Results from the Interviews

General impression about the events is positive: *“I like that events are stylish, organic with “Scandinavian” image,”* said the Beneficiary (Entrepreneur, Latvia). At the same time there are different expectations from the events: while some organisations are looking to get practical information about the Programme’s rules and terms, other are interested to hear *“inspirational speech”* and learn more about the vision of the Programme.

The content of events in general is perceived as very informative, where one can receive answers to the questions. However, particular emphasis should be paid to provide a follow-up to the questions asked during the seminars, since the beneficiaries are very keen to receive answers to all questions asked.

The location of the events was mentioned as troublesome in several interviews and in the comment section of the survey. The main concerns were expressed by Estonian organisations and organisations from Kurzeme region in Latvia. While the beneficiaries appreciate the idea of organising the events in smaller towns, the practical access is seen as problematic, since some locations near the Estonian-Latvian border cannot be reached easily with the public transport. A three-hour drive to an event that is 2 -3 hours long is seen as challenging, therefore organisation of some transport options was suggested by the interviewed beneficiaries.

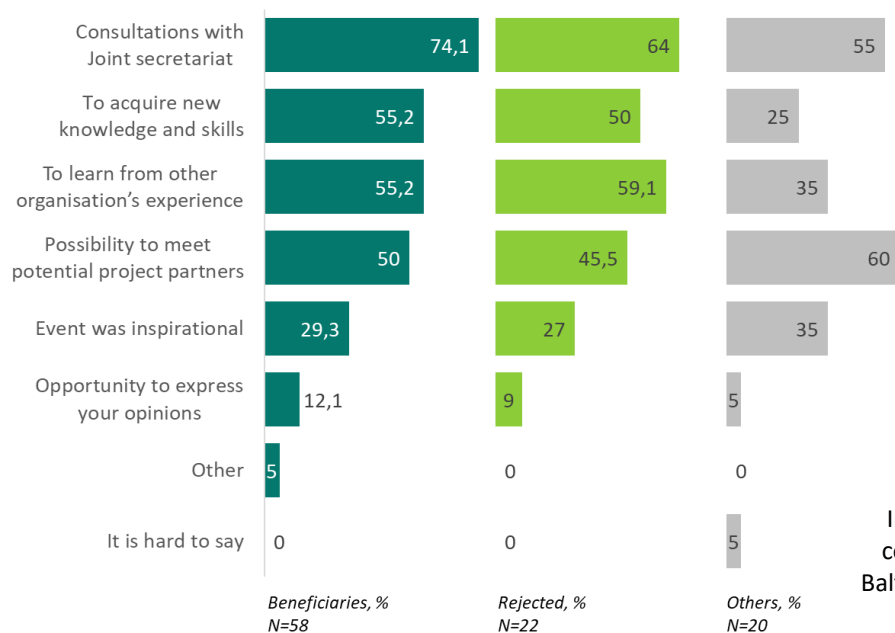
A specific topic discussed during the interviews were events that involved entrepreneurs. There is a general consensus that: *“Entrepreneurs have no time to sit in the events. It is important to let them know that there are individual consultations available,”* said an expert (Umbrella organisation, Latvia). It could be helped if the Programme participated in other events where the entrepreneurs already were present. A good example is participation of the Programme in the event *“Support to Entrepreneurs”* organised by the Ministry of Economy of Latvia. Peer-to-peer communication is also mentioned as an effective method: *“It is good that in those events not only secretariat is speaking, good that the floor is given to projects, to enterprises also,”* stated the expert (Umbrella organisation, Latvia).

² More detailed information about participants of the events, please see in section 5.1. “Which groups were better reached?”

Results from the Survey

Consultations with the JS during the events is a very valuable tool for beneficiaries (74,1%) and rejected projects (63,6%). For the group «Others» the most valuable is the possibility to meet potential project partners (60%), which could be explained by lack of previous experience in cross-border co-operation and lack of eligible partners, therefore. This is supported by the results of survey: the second most frequently mentioned reason for not submitting project idea was lack of eligible partners (See section 5.2.). The group with the rejected ideas also see value in opportunity to learn from other experience (59,1%) more often than other groups. At the same time – the group who did not submit project ideas see a low potential in events as a place to acquire new knowledge and skills (only 25%) and learn from other experience (only 35%).

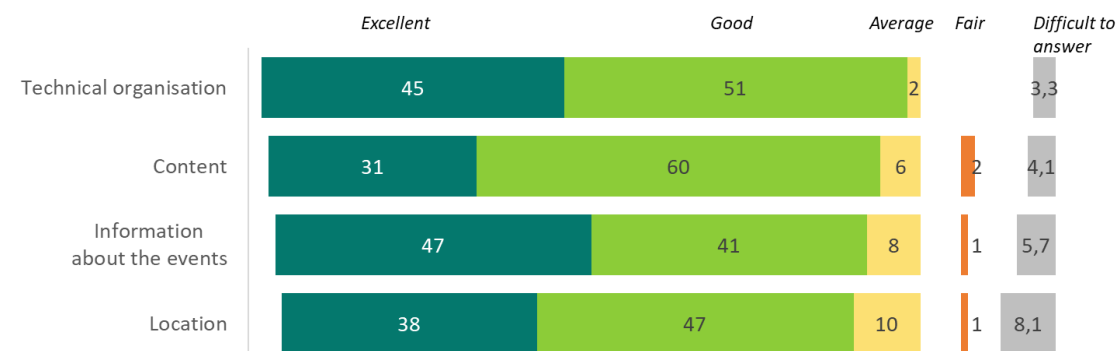
Picture 5: What was the most valuable thing about the events?



Source: Survey Implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

The overall performance of the events organised by the JS is highly valued. Overall grades received: “Technical organisation” – 4,44, “Content of the event” – 4,38, “Availability of information about the events” – 4,27, “Location of the event” – 4,21. The location of the events received the highest percentage (10%) of rating “3”, which correlates with the views expressed during the interviews.

Picture 6: How would you evaluate overall performance of the events organised by the JS?



Base: all respondents, % N=123

Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

Conclusions

- Although there is an increasing communication via internet and online tools, there still is a merit in organising *face to face* events as they provide opportunity to meet, talk and discuss. However, some steps could be taken to address concerns raised and make these events more accessible also to those from more remote territories. More on this, see in Chapter 6.1.
- To a certain extent there seem to be different expectations from the events from the different perspectives of more vs. less experienced organisations. More experienced seek precise information on rules and requirements, while the less experienced look for more inspiration, understanding of the Programme, partner search.

3.3. Social media

The Programme has an active Facebook page³ and minor activity on YouTube (36 subscribers). There are no activities on other social media e.g., Twitter, Instagram. The Facebook page has been active since the previous planning period. The number of followers has steadily doubled over the course of two years from 861 in November 2015 to 1664 followers in December 2017.⁴

The number of followers is considerably higher than for similar cross-border cooperation programmes, e.g., Interreg Central Baltic Sea⁵ has 725 followers, Interreg Latvia-Lithuania programme⁶ has 687 followers, Latvia – Lithuania – Belarus Programme⁷ has 432 followers and Latvia – Russia programme⁸ has 183 followers, but lower than for the Interreg Baltic Sea region⁹ with 1953 followers. However, it should be noted that the Baltic Sea region Programme covers larger territory than the Estonia-Latvia programme.

In December 2017 the Programme's Facebook page was the 11th most popular governmental page in Estonia¹⁰ (as it is registered in Estonia) and 40th under the category "Society".

Although the Programme has one of the highest number of followers, its performance index is lower than average for similar pages (see Picture 7). Also, audience engagement rate is lower than for other similar pages. Thus, the posts on the Programme's page reach proportionally less people than for other similar pages. This

could be due to the algorithms used by Facebook, where more frequent posts on the Programme's page result in less posts are shown to the followers.

Picture 7: Comparison of performance of selected Interreg programme Facebook pages (January – December 2017)

	Page Performance Index	Number of fans	Engagement	Post interaction	Response time	Posts per day
Central Baltic Programme	8.0%	n.a.	0.063%	2.0%	n.a.	0.2
Estonia - Latvia Programme	5.0%	n.a.	0.021%	0.62%	8.1 h	0.6
Interreg Baltic Sea Region	4.0%	n.a.	0.0057%	0.66%	n.a.	0.1
Interreg Latvia - Lithuania Program...	10.0%	n.a.	0.085%	3.0%	n.a.	0.3
Average values	6.8%	n.a.	0.043%	1.6%	8.1 h	0.3

Source: Fanpagecarma.com, 2017

However, the average daily reach is 333, which could be considered high. The highest daily reach (4010) has been recorded on March 15, 2017, the day when two simultaneous partner seminars took place in Pärnu and Cēsis, which could have been a trigger for higher reach.

³ Available: <https://www.facebook.com/estlat/>

⁴ More detailed information about the Facebook page followers, please see in section 5.1. "Which groups were better reached?"

⁵ Available: <https://www.facebook.com/centralbaltic/>

⁶ Available: <https://www.facebook.com/LatviaLithuaniaProgramme/>

⁷ Available: <https://www.facebook.com/latvialithuanibelarus/>

⁸ Available: <https://www.facebook.com/latruscbc/>

⁹ Available: <https://www.facebook.com/interreg.balticsearegion/>

¹⁰ See Socialbakers.com (to retrieve data one must register):

<https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/estonia/society/governmental/page-1-2/>

Among the five most popular posts (posts with the highest reach) in the period 2016 – 2017 were the posts about project activities and results under the 1st Call and a video from the EC day 2015¹¹. Posts about project activities received higher attention due to the project partners involvement in sharing. Video posts in general achieve higher reach due to the Facebook algorithms. This list does not include two posts with Job announcements at the JS.

Table 1: Most popular posts on the Programme Facebook page (2016 – 2017)¹²

Date	Reach	Topic
22.03.2017	8780	UNESCO tourism project signing partnership agreement
05.01.2016	5538	Video about European Cooperation day, 2015
13.01.2017.	3103	Announcement of 28 projects selected under the 1st call
27.11.2017.	3076	Speed-pitch session by EstLatAccelerate (entrepreneurship project) at the Digital Freedom Festival in Riga
05.04.2017.	2518	Kick-Off event of the Green Railway (tourism project)

Source: Facebook Insights

¹¹ This list does not include two posts with Job announcements at the JS as these kinds of posts are not something that could be strategically planned ahead.

¹² Available: <https://www.facebook.com/estlat/posts/1308468185897941>;
<https://www.facebook.com/estlat/videos/950710225007074/>;
<https://www.facebook.com/estlat/posts/1245639732180787>;
<https://www.facebook.com/estlat/posts/1545692368842187>;
<https://www.facebook.com/estlat/posts/1322849807793112>

Results from the Interviews

People involved in the project management seemed not too closely involved in social media communication due to their busy schedules, therefore most of the interviewed persons either did not follow Facebook page or had not noticed many activities. Nevertheless, most of them acknowledged that social media was an integral part of contemporary communication.

Regarding the content of the Facebook page the comment was made by the expert from an umbrella organisations (Latvia) that information on social media was a source of inspiration for future projects. In particular, the beneficiaries are interested to learn about the activities implemented under other project, in order to incorporate some best praxis in their potential future projects.

However, saturation of information is an additional challenge. Need to stand out, attract, be interesting and useful is crucial. The beneficiaries are often following several Interreg programmes on Facebook, therefore the Programme needs to make extra efforts to be distinct from other programmes. Several respondents of the survey also noted that the posts did not come up in their feed, even if they were following the page.

In general Facebook is considered rather as an “entertainment” channel, and content-related information is expected from the Programme’s webpage or other sources. Similar views were expressed in the comment section of the survey.

Results from the Survey

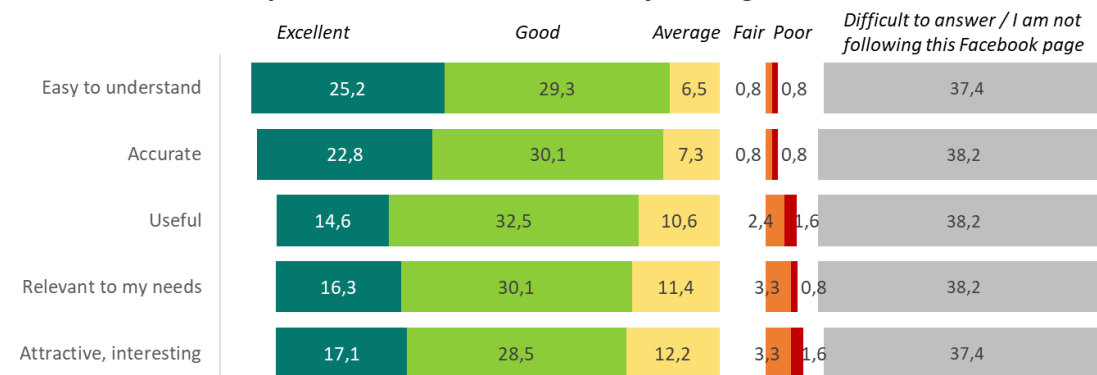
The survey results support notions observed during the interviews: almost 40% of all respondents have chosen answer “It is hard to say/ I do not follow this Facebook page”.

Among those who have evaluated communication on Facebook the average grades are fairly high: “It is easy to understand” – average grade 4,23; “It is accurate” – 4,18; “It is relevant to my needs” – 3,93; “It is useful”- 3,91; “It is attractive, interesting”- 3,9.“ It should be noted that question “It is attractive, interesting” - has received highest percentage of grades “1-3” (17,1%). There are high expectations towards content, as it should be attractive and interesting, but these expectations might be contradicting with the overall style of state institutions including the Programme. Other assumption could be that the posts simply have not been seen by the followers (as the analytical data show) and the assumptions have been made on the general perception on the communication style of government institutions.

Conclusions:

- Specific project related posts prove to be more interesting and relatable to more persons, therefore these posts achieve wider reach;
- Frequency of posts that receive no reactions on the page might cause lower reach for all other posts due to the algorithms used by Facebook, therefore each post should be thoroughly considered;
- The Facebook page provides Programme related information to social media users, however some measures could be taken to achieve better penetration among followers and wider audience. More on this, see in the section 6.1. “Is there a room for improvement of communication?”

Picture 8: How would you characterise communication of the Programme on Facebook?



Base: all respondents, % N=123

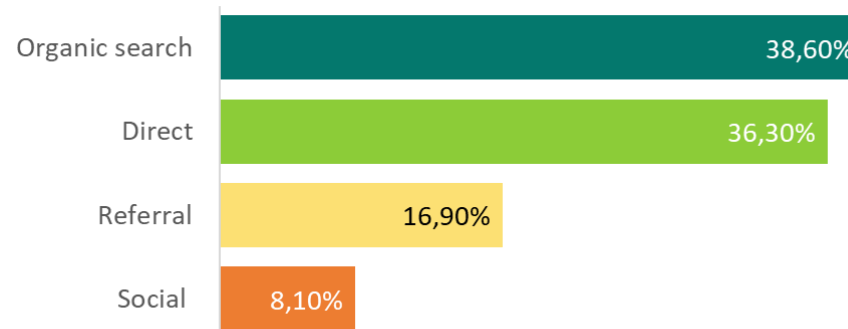
Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

3.4. Webpage

Over the course of three years (February 2015 – November 2017) the website www.estlat.eu has acquired 292 912 page views made by 37 878 users¹³. Over the years the page has achieved decreasing bounce rate¹⁴ from 50,4% in 2015 to 43,36% in 2017, which shows that people visiting the site more often visit more than one page of the web site. Also, the percentage of returned visitors has increased from 47,3% in 2015 to 61,5% in 2017, which confirms that the site is useful for those who have visited it, and that they choose to return. The peak number of page sessions has been recorded in the Spring 2016, which corresponds to the launch of the 1st Call.

Over the period the largest number of visitors have found the page through organic search (38,6%), direct address (36,3%), referral from other sites (16,9%), but only 8,1% from social media. In 2017 there was a slight increase for the acquired visitors from the direct address and social media, showing that the website has become more recognisable and that social media posts have slowly become a better tool for attracting new visitors, - the new potential project beneficiaries.

Picture 9: Top channels for attracting visitors to website estlat.eu (2015 – 2017)



Source: Google analytics

The most visited page over the three year period has been the homepage or the landing page with approx. 20% of pageviews. It is followed by the page in the old website devoted to the new planning period: 2014 -2020 (8,5%), and the contact page (2,1%). In 2017, after the launch of the new website in March, the second most visited page has been the page with the guiding documents (4,8%), the EstLat Results page (4%), and the page on Programme's status (3,4%).

This is in line with the opinions expressed in the interviews, where people stated that they mostly visited the page to find documents necessary for reporting (more from interviews).

¹³ Source: Google analytics. More detailed information about visitors of the website please see in section 5.1. "Which groups were better reached?"

¹⁴ Bounce rate - a bounce is calculated specifically as a session that triggers only a single request to the Analytics server, such as when a user opens a single page on site and then exits without triggering any other requests to the Analytics server during that session.

Results from the Interviews

During the interviews several persons expressed view that the current website was not always easy to navigate at the beginning. However, with more experience, it became clearer. The comment made in the survey provides a summary of these: *“Of course, experience comes with practice and with using the website it grows more and more familiar. But first, when started using it, it was quite difficult to understand and navigate.”*

The interviewed beneficiaries considered that it was easy to navigate and it was well divided, but they were visiting only the site devoted to the beneficiaries where all necessary documents could be found.

When it was necessary to find something from other sections, also the beneficiaries faced some difficulties, e.g., locating that FAQ section that existed previously. On the other hand, there was an opinion expressed: *“I like that immediately you see the kind of projects that are supported,”* stated an expert (umbrella organisation, Latvia), but added: *“Personally for me, those animations seem a little bit out of the context.”*

Results from the Survey

Among those, who have evaluated the website, average grades are fairly high: “It is useful” – 4,44; “It is accurate” – 4,41, “It is relevant to my needs” – 4,26; “It is easy to understand” – 4,23; “I like that website News are interlinked with Facebook feed”; “It is easy to navigate, to find information that I need” – 4,06; “It is attractive, interesting” – 4,02.

It should be noted that 1/3 of the respondents chose the answer “It is hard to say/ I have not visited this website”, when they were asked about the interlinked Facebook feed with news on the website. This may indicate that the website visitors perhaps did not pay attention to the news, and were going directly to the page of their interest, e.g., project documents for beneficiaries.

It should be noted that the criteria “It is interesting, attractive” and “It is easy to navigate” received the highest percentage of grades “1-3” (both criteria - 15,4%). Since the primary aim of the website is not about attractiveness, this is an acceptable result. On the other hand, the rating given in relation to the navigation process could be a reason to revisit the current structure of the website.

Picture 10: How would you characterise programme’s website: www.estlat.eu?



Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

3.5. Publications and promotional materials

Conclusions

- The website is seen as the main source of useful and accurate information about the Programme. The beneficiaries are satisfied with the access to documents;
- The interviews and survey demonstrated that some of the first-time site visitors struggled to find necessary information;
- Social media more often are used as a source to attract new visitors to the website, hoping that new visitors would become “consumers” or in the case of the Programme – submit a qualitative project idea and project proposal. Google analytics data show that in this respect the Facebook page of the Programme is not a significant source of attraction. It should be decided if the Programme would like to see the Facebook page as this kind of tool, and further steps should be taken to ensure it. The current decision to link the Facebook feed with the website news works into the opposite direction – it draws the visitors away from the website to the Facebook. Hence, there is a considerable potential to lose the visitors due to other more interesting posts by other pages or users.

Results from the Survey

Although most of the interviewed persons stated that they struggled to identify publications or promotional materials produced by the JS, several of the produced materials were considered as being successful. The ones selected were highlighted due to easy language, design and usefulness for the audience:

- The short infographics about the rules of the Programme were considered as particularly helpful for the entrepreneurs¹⁵;
- The Programme guidelines in “easy language” prepared for the launch event¹⁶;
- The brochure about the best practice examples from the previous period¹⁷ was seen as a helpful tool to understand better what kind of projects were expected by the Programme. However, consideration should be given to avoid unnecessary production of hard cover materials due to environmental concerns.

¹⁵ Available: <https://www.facebook.com/estlat/posts/1491212494290175>

¹⁶ Available:

https://estlat.eu/assets/upload/For%20applicants/Applying%20for%20funding/2017%20presentations/3rd%20call%20kick-off/Programme%20rules%20for%20the%203rd%20call_JS.pdf

¹⁷ Available <https://estlat.eu/en/estlat-results/estonia-latvia-stories.html>

When asked about the Programme documents, the eMS system was one of the topics most frequently discussed. Also, several comments in the survey were made especially about the eMS system. The concerns expressed about the functioning of the eMS system included: limit of words allowed in several sections in the eMS application (where wider explanation was needed, there was a small limit set, but much higher limit was set for topics where a short remark was needed); difficulties were noted to download the pdf files and printed versions did not correspond to the document in the eMS system; lack of ability to see the “big picture” of the project, since only separate parts were visible at a time; the eMS AF budget insert was not user-friendly and required repeating budget lines for each partner.

The survey shows that the respondents do not tend very frequently choose grade “5” while evaluating the Programme documentation. However, impressive percentage have evaluated the Programme documents with the grade “4”, which suggests that there might be room for improvement of these documents; but in general they are clear and easy to use. At the same time, it should be noted that no one has chosen grade “1” for any of the documents. The data also show, that more people chose answer “It is hard to say” when more specific documents were reviewed, since they did not deal with those documents.

Among those beneficiaries who expressed their views, the documents “Project idea form” received the highest average grade – 4,08; “Declarations and co-financing statements of partners” – 4,06; Financial guidelines (prepared by the Financial control)¹⁸ – 4,03; “Programme Manual” - 4; “Publicity Guidelines” - 4;

“Annex to the Manual Pre-payment procedure” - 4; “eMS Guidelines” - 3,93; “Annex to the Manual Complaint procedure” – 3,89; “De minimis aid form” – 3,88; “Annex to the Manual Revenue Guidelines” – 3,87; “Full project application form in eMS” – 3,81; “Annex to the Manual State Aid” – 3,79.

Picture 11: How would you evaluate programme and project documentation in terms of how understandable and easy to use they are?



Base: beneficiaries, % N=67

¹⁸ This question was answered only by organisations from Latvia. Estonian organisations select answer “It is hard to say”. Therefore, average grade is being calculated among respondents from Latvia.

Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

Conclusions

- Short extracts from the Programme documents explaining basic rules are highly appreciated by the potential beneficiaries. Elaboration of such materials is a considerable challenge as it requires ability to extract the most important aspects, compose them shortly without losing technical details, but the result is always effective;
- Project stories is an excellent way to show the Programme's achievements, provide inspiration to new and current beneficiaries. However, printing of books and brochures does not always serve the purpose and might be replaced by electronic versions that are less expensive and environmentally more friendly;
- Programme documents and eMS system are regarded in general as clear and easy to use. At the same time there is a room for improvement. Mostly concerns are made regarding technical issues that could be easily addressed.

3.6. Direct communication

Results from the Interviews

There is an overall consent among the interviewed persons that direct communication via emails from the JS is very useful, non-disturbing and sufficient: *"They are not sending anything redundant, therefore everything that is being sent is being read"*.

The beneficiaries also acknowledged that they did not have time to follow social media or regularly visit the website due to their busy schedules. Therefore they highly appreciated that all major changes, information on events was sent to their emails.

"Keep it going in the same way, this is done through the right channel and the necessary information reaches all target groups. Sharing of information via emails is a very good approach," said the Beneficiary (Municipal umbrella organisation, Estonia).

The beneficiaries favour receiving emails, which include references to the relevant documents, that can be easily archived. They would further appreciate, if major changes in the documents were extracted in order to save the readers' time.

Some of the interviewed persons also reflected on direct communication with the JS via phones calls or other means except emails, preferring a direct conversation: *"For me the easiest way to find answers to my problems is not to search through the documentation, but to ask directly from the contact person of the Secretariat,"* said the Beneficiary (Municipal umbrella organisation, Estonia). However, this was contradicted by another Beneficiary representing an umbrella organisation, who emphasised the importance to receive written answers, since oral answers cannot be later referred to.

Conclusions

- Current volume and content of direct e-mail communication is seen as sufficient and appropriate, and no further major adjustments are necessary.

IV HOW EFFECTIVE HAS BEEN CONSULTATION PROCESS?

4.1. Consultations during submission process

Results from the Interviews

Consultations are seen as useful and straightforward in general, without misleading information or rising hopes for project ideas that do not correspond to the Programme priorities. The beneficiaries highly praised the informal and *to the point* consultations provided during the elaboration of the project.

Most of the interviewed persons appreciated that there were two phases for submitting project – idea and full application, that allowed finetuning the project idea at the initial stage without major investment of time and human resources. An important aspect was also raised regarding the use of language: *“It is good that consultations are provided in native language. It helps a lot,”* stated the Beneficiary (Tourism sector, Latvia).

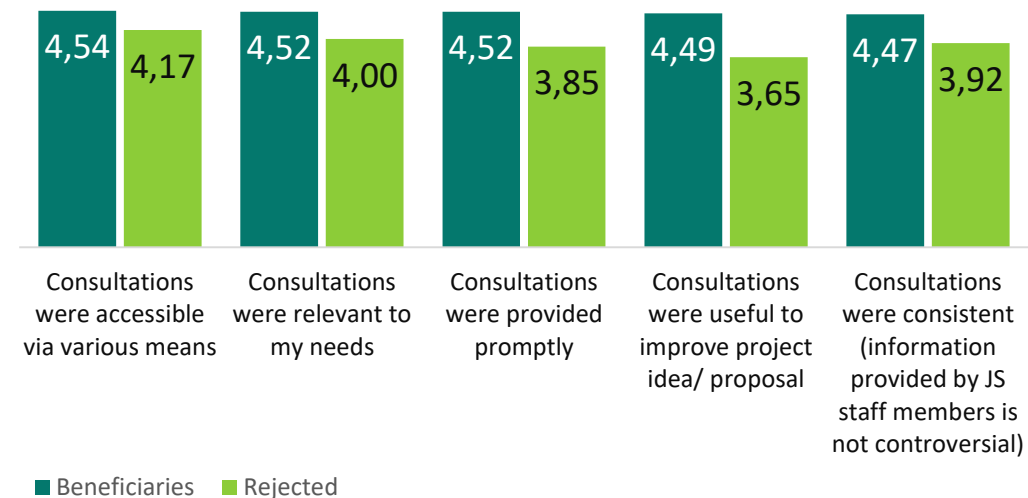
Inevitably, less satisfied are those whose ideas were not supported: *“We relied on the suggestions made by the secretariat and changed the focus of the project proposal and partner, but during evaluation process it proved to be misled. We lost because of it,”* said an umbrella organisation from Latvia, whose idea was rejected. The applicants whose ideas were rejected stressed the need to explain the results of the evaluation in more detail. There was a feeling expressed that the feedback from the JS was insufficient in cases, when the applications were rejected.

On the other hand, it was acknowledged, that the organisations need to be more prepared for the consultations and ask more specific questions in order to receive useful answers. Generic expectations do not help to improve the projects substantially.

Results from the Survey

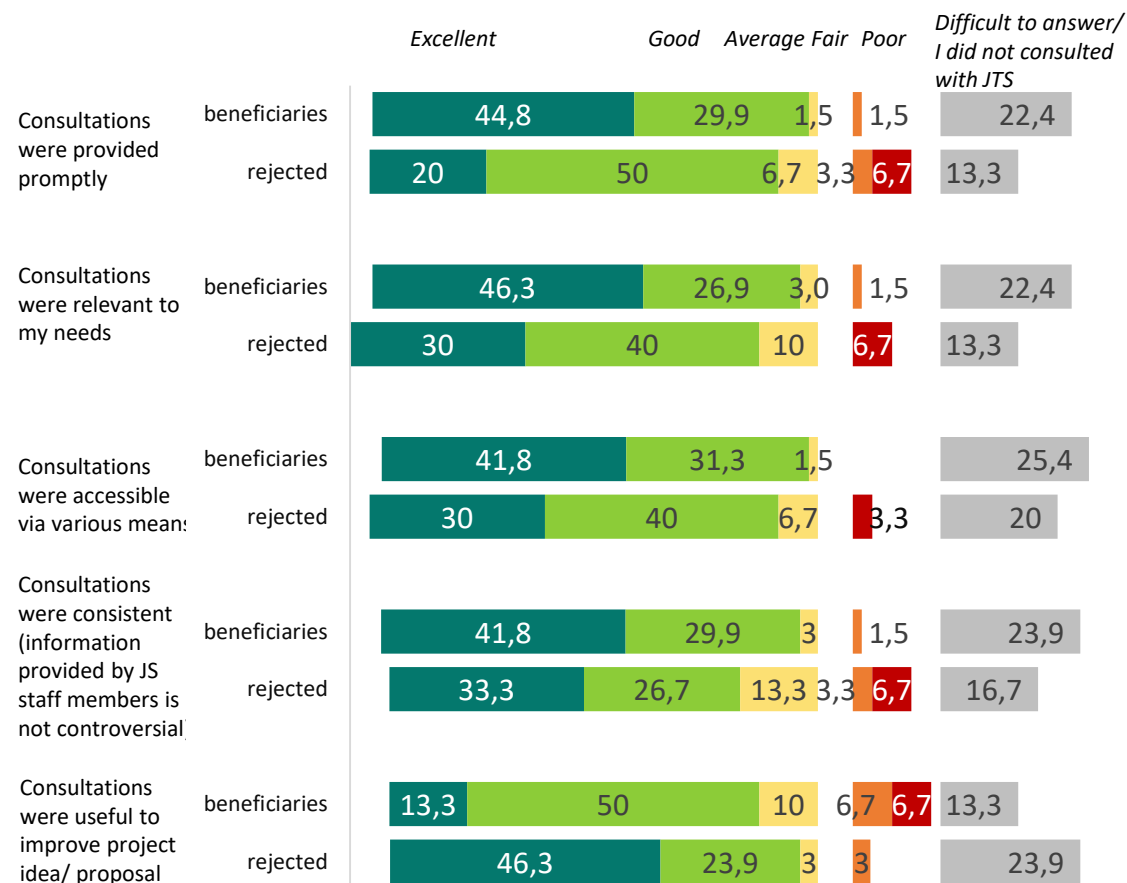
The results of the survey show that the ones with rejected ideas tend to assess provided consultations with lower grades. The most considerable differences could be observed regarding usefulness of consultations during the process of improving project idea: only 13% of those with rejected idea gave rating “5” if compared to 46,3% among the Beneficiaries (see Picture 13).

Picture 12: Average grade given to consultations by beneficiaries and authors of rejected ideas



Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

Picture 13: How would you evaluate consultations provided by the JS during process of developing and submitting project idea and / or project proposal?



Base: beneficiaries, % N=67, rejected, % N=30

Conclusions

- Consultations during submission period are seen more favorably by those whose projects have been funded. Those whose ideas were not supported often have been left wondering – why their idea had been rejected, waiting for more detailed explanation. Better explanation could also encourage them to submit improved project ideas for the next call instead of abandoning it completely.
- Consultations via online chat programmes could solve the need for simultaneous conversation and need for written reference.

4.2. Consultations during implementation process

Results from the Interviews

The interviewed beneficiaries are in different stages of implementation. Those who have not yet submitted reports or have submitted just recently are in general more positive about the consultations during implementation period, since they have had experience only with the Programme Consultants at the JS. Those who have submitted reports a while ago expressed deep concerns about the time it takes for the Financial Controllers to evaluate the reports and confirm payments. Especially crucial it is for the NGO and entrepreneurs as they depend on these funds to ensure operation in general: *“Communication with the Financial Controllers in general is acceptable, but the time it takes to review the financial report is unacceptable. It is great that everything could be signed with eSignature. It is truly timesaving,”* said the Beneficiary, entrepreneur (Latvia).

Most of the concerns have been expressed regarding requests for clarifications, which seem to differentiate in Latvia and Estonia. There is a general notion, that the process is much longer in Latvia, and more detailed and more specific information is required there. In this respect the beneficiaries would appreciate some assistance from the JS. Some beneficiaries had the impression that there were different interpretations provided by the financial controllers, since they did not participate in the seminars organised by the JS. However, this is being contradicted by another beneficiary, the municipal umbrella organisation from Estonia: *“Compared to some other programmes from different fields, where delays occur and there are contradictory answers from different persons, this has never happened under Estonian-Latvian Programme.”*

Discrepancies have also been noted in the comment section of the survey, reporting different answers received in the partner seminars in Tartu and Pärnu, or different approaches used.

A beneficiary from Estonia representing an education and research institution also noticed that: *“... communication style of the 1-st level controllers is different from that of the Secretariat and could be improved.”*

As seen from the previous statements, the JS in many cases is seen as the positive force that could influence the overly careful Financial Controllers.

Individual comments have been made comparing communication of the Brussels based programmes' secretariats and the JS team based in Latvia. The notion was that the secretariats based in Brussels had more flexible approach, but the national based teams were more restricted with their answers, especially if there were non-standard situations.

Also the more experienced Beneficiaries call for more flexibility during implementation of projects from the JS side: *“There is a feeling that they [JS] want to control too much. Question is – for whom are these projects meant? For the Programme or to solve needs in the region?”* – asked the Beneficiary (NGO, Latvia).

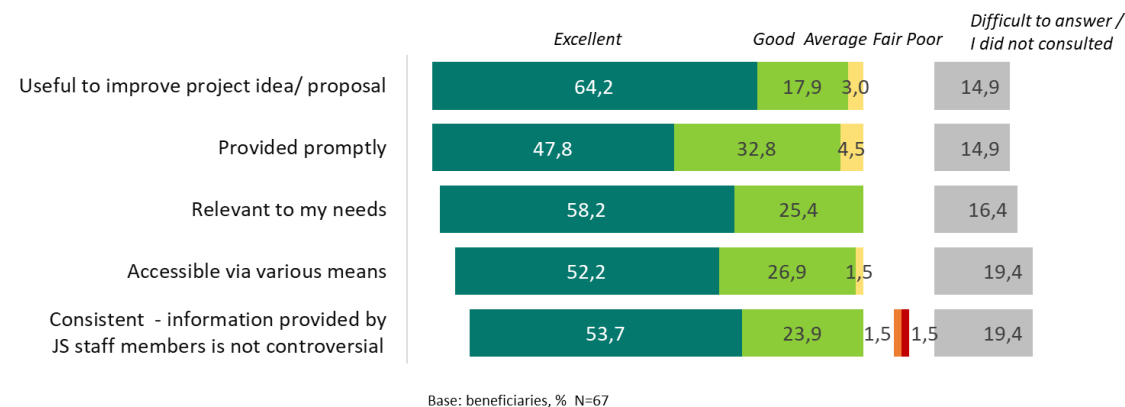
Individual concerns were expressed regarding the bureaucratic approach of the JS during the implementation process, when changes had been asked by the beneficiaries – the JS follows the texts written in the project, while the beneficiaries would appreciate more flexible approach.

Results from the Survey

Consultations during the implementation period received the same high average grades as consultations during the submission process. Criteria «Consultations were relevant to my needs» received average grade - 4,7 (during submission period - 4,52); «Consultations were accessible via various means»- 4,63 (4,54); «Consultations were consistent»- 4,57 (4,47); «Consultations were provided promptly»- 4,51 (4,52).

It must be noted that despite concerns raised during interviews, the overall evaluation of consultations during implementation period in some cases received even higher grades than during the submission period. Also, the criterion “consultations were consistent” received higher grade than consultations during submission period. This might indicate that the criticism received during the interviews was related to the specific experience of the interviewed persons, rather than the overall experience for applicants and beneficiaries.

Picture 14: How would you evaluate consultations provided by the Joint secretariat (JS) during process of implementation of project?



Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

Conclusions

- The main concern of the Beneficiaries during the implementation period is work of the Financial Controllers, not the JS. Inconsistency of their requirements with the information given during seminars is perceived as an issue that needs to be addressed to avoid further escalation or negative feedback.
- Finding balance between the Programme’s requirements and sound logic of project implementation and changing environment sometimes asks for flexibility. This is a core issue to ensure positive and professional relations with the Beneficiaries. In this respect, some efforts could be devoted to review the reporting requirements.

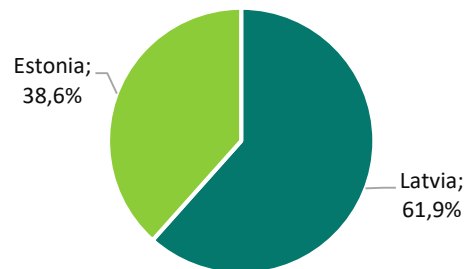
V HAS THE PROGRAMME REACHED THE TARGET GROUP?

5.1. Which groups were better reached?

Who was reached through the events?

Almost 62% of the event participants are from Latvia (see Picture 15). It is notable that in some cases events organised in the territory of Estonia attracted more organisations from Latvia than from Estonia (e.g. the Programme launching event on environmental awareness, 2015, 13 April, Pärnu; the 3rd Call launching event, 2017, 5 October, Tartu). One of the explanations for higher participation of organisations from Latvia is larger eligible territory. This yields a larger number of potential applicant organisations, especially since Riga-based organisations are eligible, but Tallinn-based ones are not.

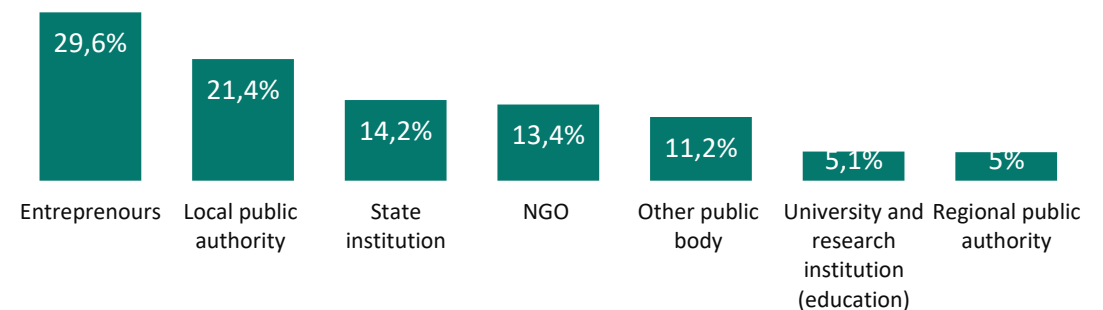
Picture 15: Participants of the events organised by the JS by country of origin (n=2032)



Source: Lists of event participants (January 2015 – November 2017), including participants of European Cooperation Days 2015, 2016, 2017

Almost 30% of the event participants are private enterprises, 21% are local public authorities (see Picture 16). Considering the number of non-governmental organisations in the eligible region, source for concern could be the low participation of NGOs in the events. Also, the events have attracted only 69 (5,1%) representatives of universities and research institutions.

Picture 16: Participants in events organised by the JS by type of organisation (n=1348)



Source: Lists of event participants (January 2015 – November 2017), excluding participants of European Cooperation Days 2015, 2016, 2017

Who was reached through Facebook?

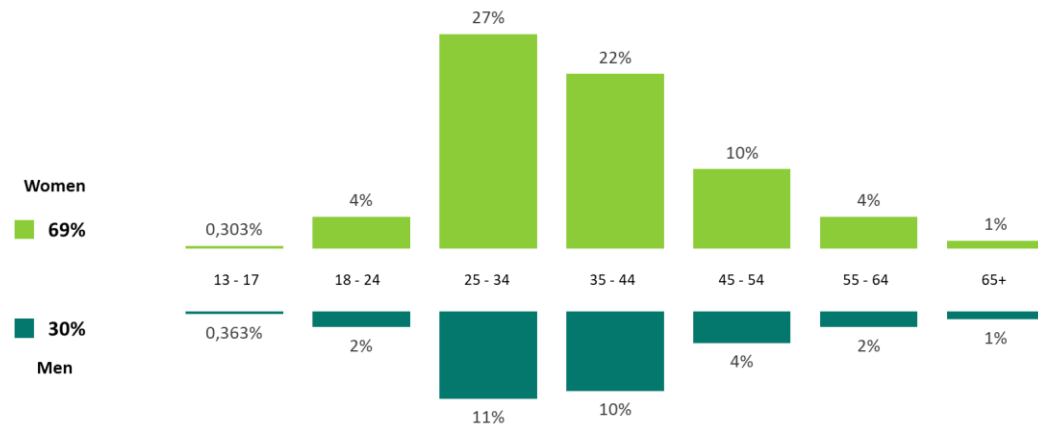
At the end of 2017 there were 1664 followers of the Programme's Facebook page. 892 of them were from Latvia (53,6%), 443 were from Estonia (26,6%) and the rest were from other countries, e.g., UK, Finland, Germany, Russia, etc.

Analysis of the reached audience shows similar results. Among TOP 10 countries are Latvia (63%), Estonia (24,3%), USA (2,5%), UK (2,4 %).¹⁹ Similarly, people who have engaged via the Facebook page are more often from Latvia than from Estonia.

Estonia has slightly lower number of Facebook users (620 000 compared to 720 000 in Latvia)²⁰ due to smaller number of country inhabitants. But the considerably lower reach of the Programme's Facebook page in Estonia could also have other reasons.

The most frequent followers of the Facebook page are women (69%) in the age groups 25 – 34 years (27%) and 35-44 years (22%).

Picture 17: Followers of the Programme's page on Facebook by gender and age



Source: Facebook insights

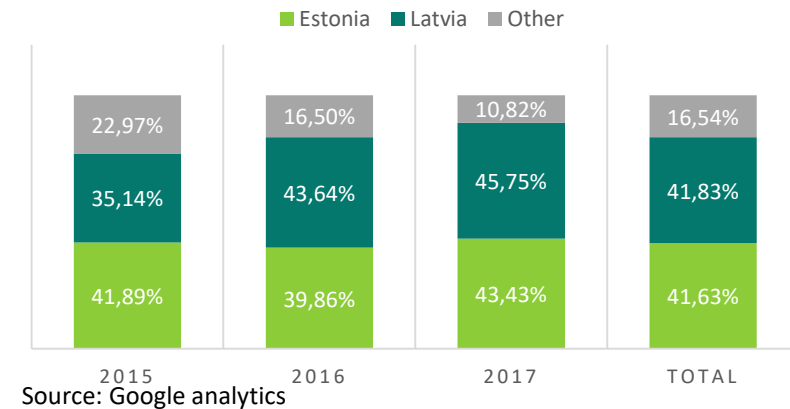
¹⁹ Source: Facebook Insights

²⁰ June, 2017, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm>

Who was reached through the website?

In the time period from 2015 – 2017 the Programme website has equally attracted visitor sessions from Latvia (41,83%) and Estonia (41,63%). Also users (visitors) equally represent Latvia (34,29%) and Estonia (35,66%). Since January 2015 the Programme's website has been visited by more than 39 thousand new users.

Picture 18: Sessions on the website www.estlat.eu by country (2015 -2017)



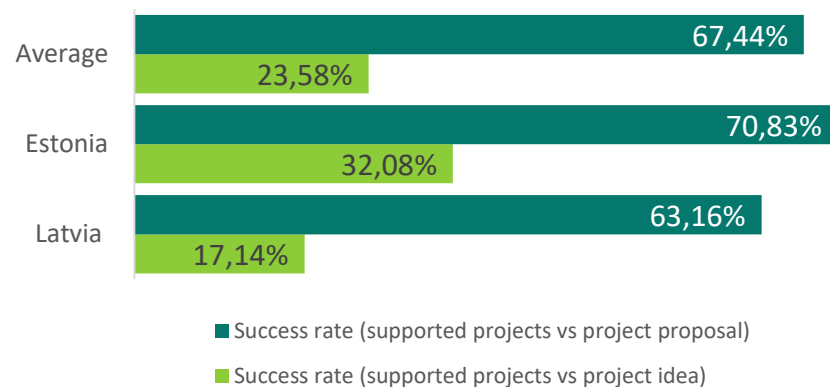
Project ideas and proposals yielded?

Although there is no official aim at reaching certain number of submitted project ideas and project proposals, internally there is a vision on the number that could be considered satisfactory. The aims are set high, therefore not all of them have been met. However, due to the limited financing for the Programme, the success rate for those who submitted project idea for the first call is 23,6%, therefore increasing number of submitted project ideas would decrease success rate creating more "unsatisfied clients" which in turn could damage the image of the Programme.

Analysis of submitted project ideas and project proposals under the 1st Call clearly shows that the projects submitted with the leading partner from Estonia have higher success rate at the project idea stage (32,08% Estonian lead projects compared to 17,4% Latvia lead projects), see Picture 19. The reason for this disproportion should be further analysed to determine the key aspects.

Higher number of project ideas submitted with Latvian lead partner (85 Latvian and 59 Estonian Lead partner for the 1st and 2nd Calls together) could be the result of higher reach among Latvian target audiences via all communication means.

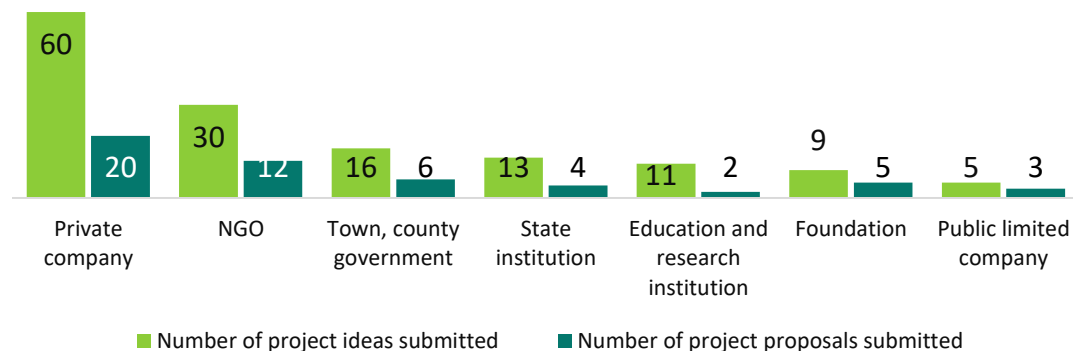
Picture 19: Success rate of submitted project ideas and project proposals by country of origin of leading partner (1st Call)



Source: List of submitted and supported project ideas and projects

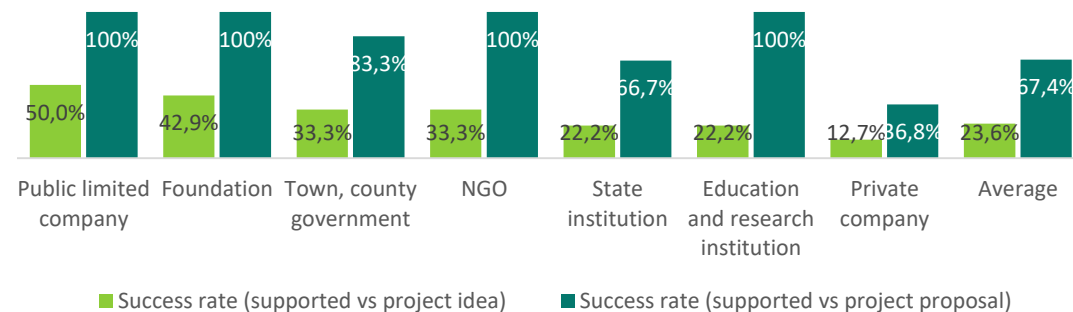
The private companies were the most active regarding submitting project ideas and project proposals for the 1st and the 2nd Calls (see Picture 20). However, success rate of their ideas and projects in the 1st Call is the lowest (see Picture 21). The highest success rate is for the public limited companies. 50% of their submitted ideas have been funded under the 1st Call, although the number of submitted projects is very low. Therefore, it cannot serve as an indicator.

Picture 20: Number of submitted project ideas and project proposals by the type of organisation of leading partner (1st and 2nd Calls)



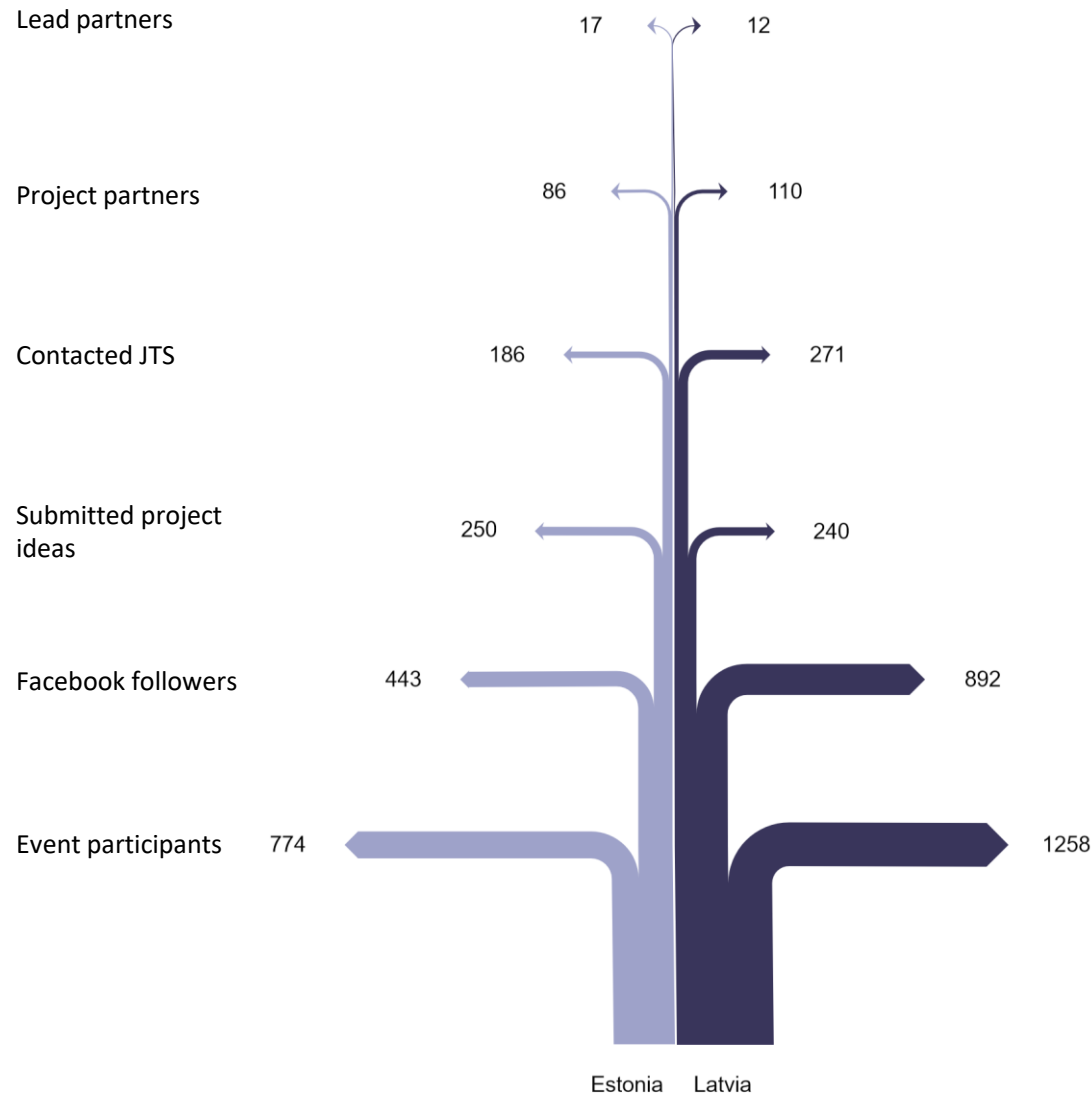
Source: List of submitted and supported project ideas and projects

Picture 21: Success rate of submitted project ideas and project proposals by the type of organisation of leading partner (1st Call)



Source: List of submitted and supported project ideas and projects

Picture 22: Number of persons from Estonia and Latvia reached by various Programme communication means



Since 2015 the Programme has reached over 39 thousand persons through the web page. 5,2% of reached persons have participated in various Programme events and 4,3% follow the Programme on Facebook. 1,3% of those reached have submitted project ideas and 1,2% have been involved in consultations with the JS. 0,58% of reached persons became beneficiaries – either as project partners (0,5%) or lead partners (0,08%). The Programme has reached proportionally similar number of persons in Estonia and Latvia. Persons and organisations from Latvia have more actively participated in communication activities.

Conclusions

- Latvian based organisations have been reached to a larger extent through events, Facebook and website, which has resulted in a larger number of project ideas submitted by the Latvian lead partner. The question remains whether it is related to larger covered territory or some other aspects, that might include communication.
- Although Tartu based JS team members are actively involved in all communication activities, it might be reasonable to assign higher responsibility for communication to a particular Estonian speaking team member. This might allow for a better penetration among Estonian audience.
- Higher number of Latvian lead project ideas and their lower success rate, leads to the conclusion, that wider audience does not guarantee more qualitative projects, although it might generate more ideas.
- Lower success rate of Latvian lead project ideas (if common issues were identified during assessment of the rejected projects) could be addressed more specifically during a devoted event or via a short info-material on “Most common mistakes in project proposals”, that could be made available in national languages.

5.2. What are the limitations for not participating in the Programme?

Results from the Interviews

“Why would you need more project proposals? The competition is already high,” was stated in the interview by the Beneficiary (Tourism sector, Latvia).

One of the limiting aspects to participate in the Programme was reappearing in several interviews – the organisations are expected to be able to pre-finance a considerable part of the project. If private companies in some cases could seek support from banks or other financial institutions, none of them are even willing to consider similar requests from NGOs.

Hence, the NGOs conclude that it is problematic for them to participate in the Programme. While the public organisations receive pre-financing and have public funds to operate, the NGOs and private companies do not. The financing rules are seen as a barrier for most of the NGOs. This opinion was repeated in several interviews, namely the limited financial capacity of the NGOs to implement projects and lack of opportunities for bridge financing. The banks do not finance organisations that have no suitable guarantees. The burden of pre-financing may negatively influence the decision whether to participate or not in the Programme’s calls, especially in case of bigger projects or several opened programmes at the same time.

Finding eligible partners, trusting them is another aspect, that was frequently discussed during the interviews. There are limitations to find eligible partners from Estonia, since most of the NGOs, academic organisations, companies are located in Tallinn, which is non-eligible area. Many companies struggle to find a partner in other country, since entrepreneurs are busy with their core business. There is a perceived need to find a partner that is working in the same field, which limits the options for cooperation. Trusting a first-time partner is an obstacle for the organisations: *“Another external factor is finding the right partner, and in case of the first-time cooperation the decision whether to take a risk with a new partner,”* stated the Beneficiary (foundation working in Environmental sector, Estonia).

At the same time, it was mentioned that companies sometimes look too narrowly, trying to find a partner working in the same field, but they could also seek partners from another field, e.g, a designer elaborating packaging or a research institution. This possibility could be more emphasised to the potential beneficiaries.

The need for cross-border co-operation and “soft” impact in business projects is seen as nuisance by some companies, therefore: *“Many think, that this is too difficult,”* said a representative from an umbrella organisation (Latvia).

Assistance is often needed: *“They [enterprises] also asked for our help as more experienced partner. This shows that for these enterprises the whole process is still complicated enough, and they do not want to go and apply alone. They do not have enough experience. This means that some kind of advisory work still needs to be done,”* noted the Beneficiary (umbrella organisation, Estonia).

In Estonia uncertain future for county governments in relation with the administrative reform is also prohibiting to take financial obligations in the form of new projects. On the other hand, in Latvia the municipalities prefer investment oriented projects, therefore the «soft kind» of projects are not that interesting for the municipalities.

Both in Estonia and Latvia, the language barrier is perceived as a limiting factors, especially for the entrepreneurs. Since many entrepreneurs do not speak sufficient English to understand the Programme’s documents, they may not even realise that the Programme is also for them. This view was supported by an umbrella organisation from Estonia, who commented that the reaction was always more positive if information was presented in the native language, especially in case of enterprises and cooperation between them. Therefore it was suggested to present at least the basic information about the Programme in the native languages.

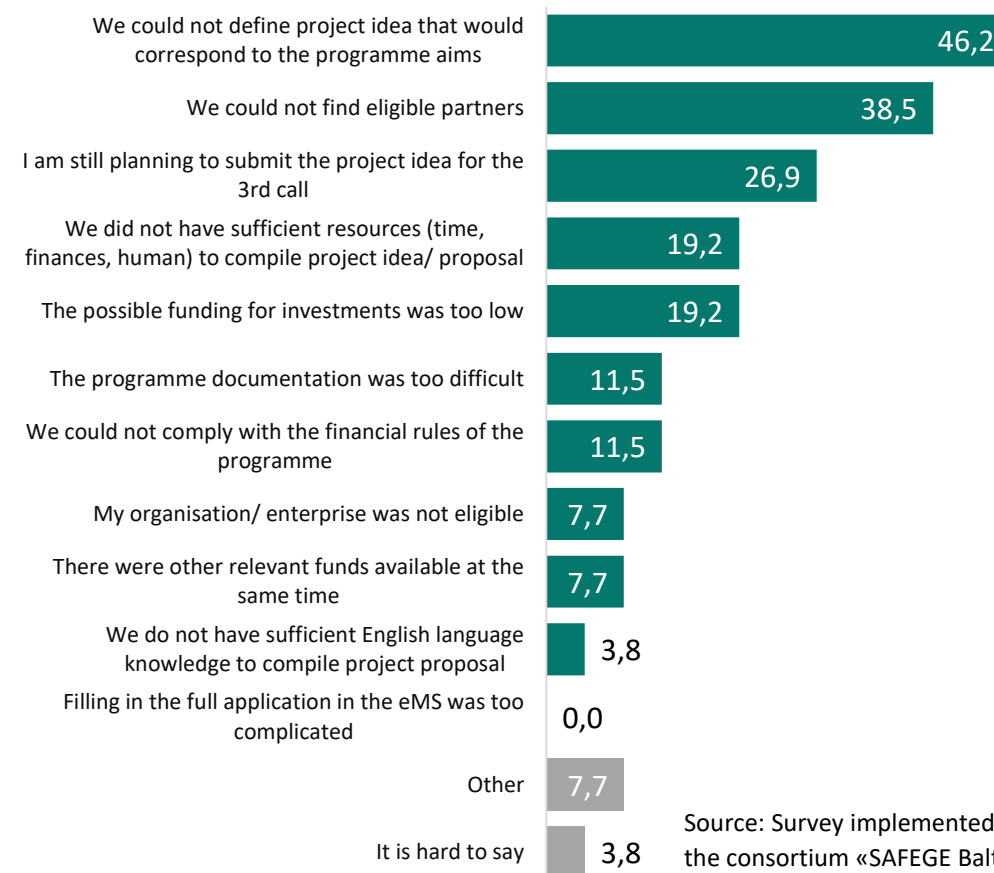
At the same time an entrepreneur from Latvia shared a critical view: *“If you want money, learn the language!”*

Still, language proves to be an obstacle during the implementation of the project. Some complaints were made, that the project partners often lack the necessary language skills and the leading partner needs to ensure translation on behalf of the project partners. In particular, the lack of language knowledge is evident for the accountants, who prepare financial reports.

Results of the Survey

Lack of eligible project idea and partners seem to be the most frequent reason for not submitting the project idea. However, these data should be considered carefully as only 26 organisations from the group “Other” have participated in the survey.

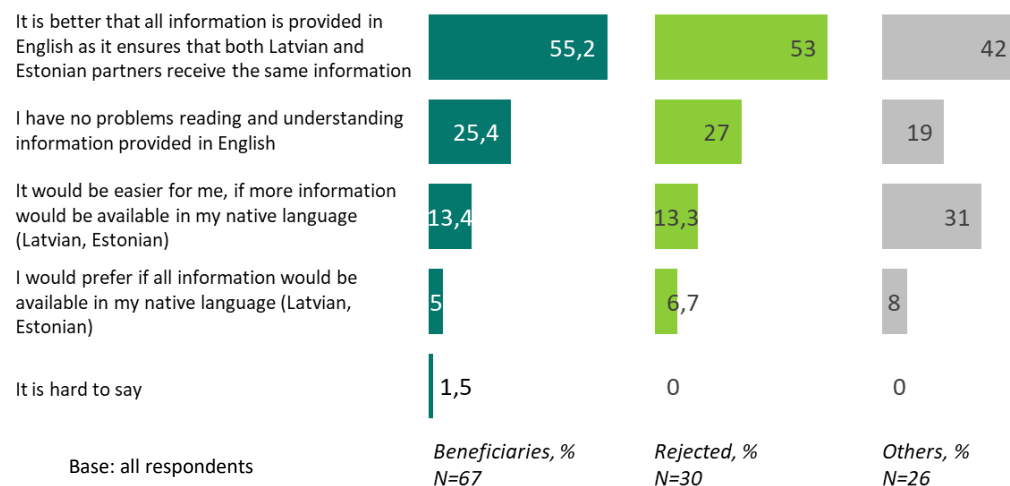
Picture 23: What reasons would best characterize why you/ your organisation/ enterprise did not submit project idea?



Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

The survey shows that among the group “Other” (who did not submit the project idea), language barrier might have played a role in the decision not to submit the idea, since less respondents from this group have chosen the first and the second answer.

Picture 24: Most of the information about the Programme is provided in English. Which (expression) description below characterises your attitude in the best way regarding communication language about the programme?



Conclusions

- The main limiting reasons include Programme’s requirements to pre-finance the projects, need for a cross-border partnership, need to speak and write in the English language, organisations’ ability to navigate the project documentation. These cannot be solved via communication means exclusively. However, the JS could take some steps to mitigate their impact, e.g., provide extracts of information in Estonian and Latvian, facilitate partner search events or promote the existing partner search tool on the Programme’s website. More on this, see in the section 6.2. “Is there a room for improvement of consultations?”

Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

VI FUTURE PROSPECTS

6.1. Is there a room for improvement of communication?

When asked about the potential improvements of communication, the general notion was that the JS provides all the necessary efforts. Since the potential number of the applicants is limited, those who are eligible and able to implement the projects have already been reached. During the interviews, the JS was encouraged to continue the excellent work done so far. Nevertheless, some issues for improvement have been identified.

Communication on project results and achievements

During the focus group discussion with participation of the JS team and Managing Authorities, the National Responsible Authorities from Latvia and Estonia, there was need expressed to make more effort to communicate the projects' results, since they are the keystone for securing funds for the Programme in the next planning period. Hence, now there are several projects in the phase of implementation, and the focus of communication should be upon the project results and Programme's impact, finding appropriate methods and channels for reaching the target audience.

The interviewed persons mentioned some potential tools that could help to increase visibility of the Programme:

- *“Big, recognisable names always help. Just mention an enterprise that has participated in the Programme and soon there will be many other enterprises seeking information,”* suggested an Umbrella organisation (Latvia);
- *“Round table discussion on practical applicability of project results, sharing – how many of the project results live and are being used after the project,”* asked the Beneficiary (Latvia);
- *“I would suggest involving municipalities in sharing best practice examples. They can put it on their websites,”* mentioned the representative of the Municipality (Latvia).

The JS is not the single source of information regarding achievements of the Programme. The Beneficiaries are the ones «holding the key» to the most interesting and valuable information and could become the main source of information. In this regard, some of the Beneficiaries are well experienced, but many organisations, especially the project partners, still lack the necessary skills.

In this respect, the JS was encouraged to train the beneficiaries and help them improve communication on project results. The focus of the training could be to deliver messages and news that concentrate on “what was achieved, who benefitted most, who and how will use the project’s results”, instead of “what was done and how many people participated”. The headlines “We started the project”, “The project partners visited other partners”, “The seminar took place” and similar should be eliminated.

Better results could be achieved by encouraging the Beneficiaries to go beyond the formal publicity requirements and treat publicity as one of the important project measures. Recognition by the JS of the best publicity measures implemented by the beneficiaries could serve as an additional source of encouragement.

There is also a need to show the link of the Programme with EU funds, since: “...*people know Estonia – Latvia Programme and assume it is financed by the governments of these countries. There should be clearer link to other Interreg programmes and EU funding,*” said the umbrella organisation whose idea was rejected (Latvia).

Although wider publicity of the results would be preferable, the main target audience are the decision makers, e.g., European Commission, responsible Ministries and Agencies from Latvia and Estonia. Therefore specific actions could be taken to address them directly or through information channels used by them. These activities could include inviting core people to participate in the Programme and project events, direct emails with the Programme and project information, targeted sponsored posts in Facebook, articles and stories in national media. The EU Representations in Latvia and Estonia follow media and report to the Headquarters in Brussels.

Attracting new beneficiaries in the future calls

As mentioned before, the JS is considered very effective in reaching potential beneficiaries. Considering the specific nature of the target audience of the Programme it is advisable to continue communication via established co-operation networks and umbrella organisations.

More information on the planning process would be appreciated, in particular regarding the provisional timeline of future calls, since it would help planning of beneficiaries’ time and resources.

Perceived image of bureaucracy

Sometimes, there are concerns, myths and prejudices surrounding the EU funded Programmes. One of them is the real and perceived image of bureaucracy related to the implementation of projects. These perceptions often stand in the way of developing and submitting projects. Creating image of the Programme as less bureaucratic, promoting attitude that everything is manageable – this could be addressed via communication. Getting current beneficiaries on board to support the JS message could be an efficient measure.

Events

Although increasing amount of communication recently is managed via internet and online tools, there still is a merit in organising *face to face* events as they provide opportunity to meet, talk and discuss better than online events.

However, some steps could be taken to address concerns raised and make these events more accessible also to those from other territories: *“If it is clear that there are insufficient number of applications, consider for example not going to Tartu, but to come to West Estonia. I cannot remember when the secretariat has been here, if at all,”* said the representative from a municipal umbrella organisation. It was suggested to consider a bigger number of introductory events in different places, one, for example, in Pärnumaa and yet other additional event somewhere near the Latvian border.

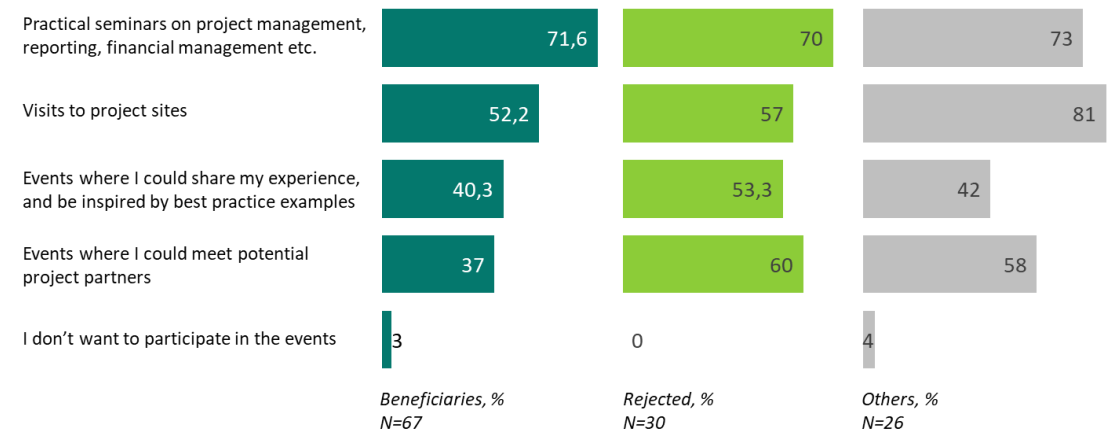
While organising events in smaller towns, the JS should inquire about the possibilities to get there with public transportation, since often schedules of public transportation in remote locations are rare.

To make the most use of the events, it would be advisable to write down and make public the questions and answers discussed during the seminars. These could be made available in the FAQ section of the website, thus creating new traffic to the website also from social media.

Interviewed persons suggested that more attention could be given to the matchmaking events where organisations could meet potential partners, and the JS could facilitate such contact-making. These could be organised as idea pitch events where Latvian and Estonian partners pitch their ideas to each other.

While the interviewed persons suggested that the partner finding events were crucial, the survey results show that events on practical implementation of the projects would attract more audiences (See Picture 24). More than 70% of respondents agreed that they would participate in such event. Visits to the project sites seemed of particular interest for the group that had not submitted projects. Perhaps they were hoping to get clearer vision on supported projects and practical experience.

Picture 25: In what kind of events about the Programme would you like to participate in the future?

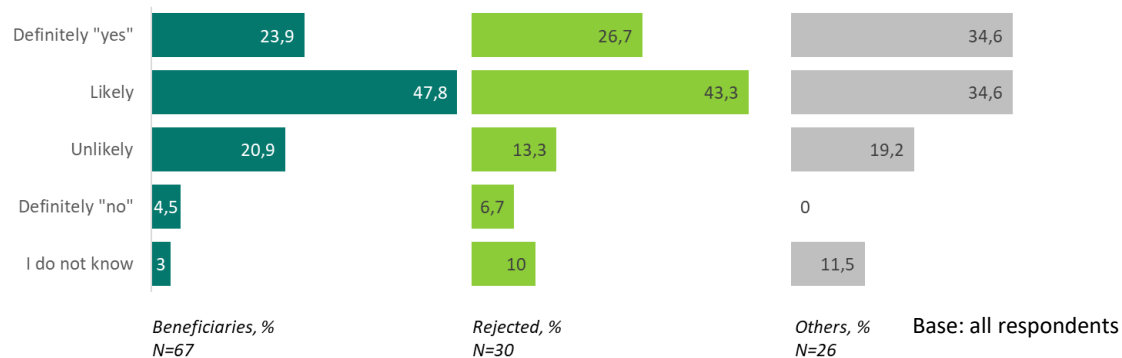


Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

Solution to the concerns about the long travel to the location of the events could be online streaming of the events or allowing to join via Skype, WhatsApp or other tools. A Facebook live video could be a useful tool as it simultaneously allows people to follow proceedings and improves visibility of the Facebook page.

Survey results show that 70% of respondents would definitely or likely follow such events via online streaming.

Picture 26: I would follow proceedings of the events via online streaming



Source: Survey implemented by the consortium «SAFEGE Baltija and Comperio», December 2017

Social media

The latest tendencies show that it has become harder and harder to reach even the followers as posts are shown to a small part of the page followers. Hence, the reach of pages is steadily decreasing. This has forced major media and even EU institutions to start boosting their posts to reach audiences. Facebook ads allow targeting very special territories, gender and age groups as well as target them by interests.

Social media are often used as a source to attract new visitors to the website, hoping that new visitors become “customers” or in the case of the Programme – submit qualitative project idea and project proposal. Google analytics data show that the Facebook page of the Programme currently is not a very significant source of attraction in this respect. If the Facebook page was required to serve as this kind of tool, steps should be taken. Most simple way to attract people would be to refer to the website where more information could be found on the topic of the post, organising mini contests that require visiting site to find some specific information or posting regularly interesting project stories on the website.

Specific project related posts prove to be more interesting and relatable to more persons, therefore achieve wider reach. Tagging organisations allow reaching wider audiences. Finding the best time to post, asking opinions, comments, commenting as a page posts of other pages and persons also could be a way of engaging people, at the same time taking into account that engaging people is a challenge for every official, government page and there is no 100% effective solution.

Frequency of the posts that receive no reactions on page might cause lower reach for all other posts due to the algorithms used by Facebook, therefore each post should be thoroughly considered.

Website

Interviews and survey showed that some of the first-time site visitors struggled to find the necessary information. The ease of access could be one of the obstacles for the first-time visitors to take next steps. This could be caused by less traditional structure of the website if compared to the sites of similar Programmes with more traditional (and therefore expected) pages, e.g., “Publications”, “News”, “FAQ”, “Events”, “Picture galleries” etc. Adding a site map could help finding the necessary information.

While the FAQ section was a part of the previous site, currently it could not be located on the site. The FAQ section would help project beneficiaries or potential beneficiaries to find answers to the questions, which would decrease number of questions to the Programme Consultants. This FAQ site could also include questions and answers from seminars that were made public.

Media outreach

Currently the most of the publicity activities²¹ are implemented through websites of municipalities and related organisations with occasional articles in regional, municipal or national newspapers. As evidenced by the number of published articles, there have been more publicity activities on Latvian side. However, this could be due to the fact that monitoring is mainly done by a Latvian speaking member of the JS team.

Wider reach in the national media (incl. printed, electronic and online) is crucial if the Programme's achievements were to be made visible to the decision makers. Topics of wider interest could become the main emphasis of publicity activities that could be used also by the JS to draw attention to the Programme's achievements and impact. Inviting journalists to a media tour on the new hiking trail, or converted railway trails, visit industrial heritage sites, enjoying products of artisan producers could generate set of publications.

Communication language

There is a general consensus that provision of basic information in the Latvian and Estonian languages would help to attract new potential beneficiaries. Information in these languages on the website would also be more sharable on social media as people could be reluctant to share news in English. The same could be said about success stories of the projects. Approach of Latvia – Lithuania programme could be explored, posting the main news in Latvian and Lithuanian²².

²¹ Source: Publicity monitoring table provided by JS

²² Available: <http://latlit.eu/informacija-latviski/>

6.2. Is there a room for improvement of consultations?

Most often, the discussed potential changes and improvements in the consultations process concerned the implementation period, when more intense encounters with the Programme Consultants and Financial Controllers were taking place. To make this more efficient, a suggestion has been made to make consultations available also via Skype or other similar Apps allowing for face-to-face conversations from distant places or writing and receiving answers in real time.

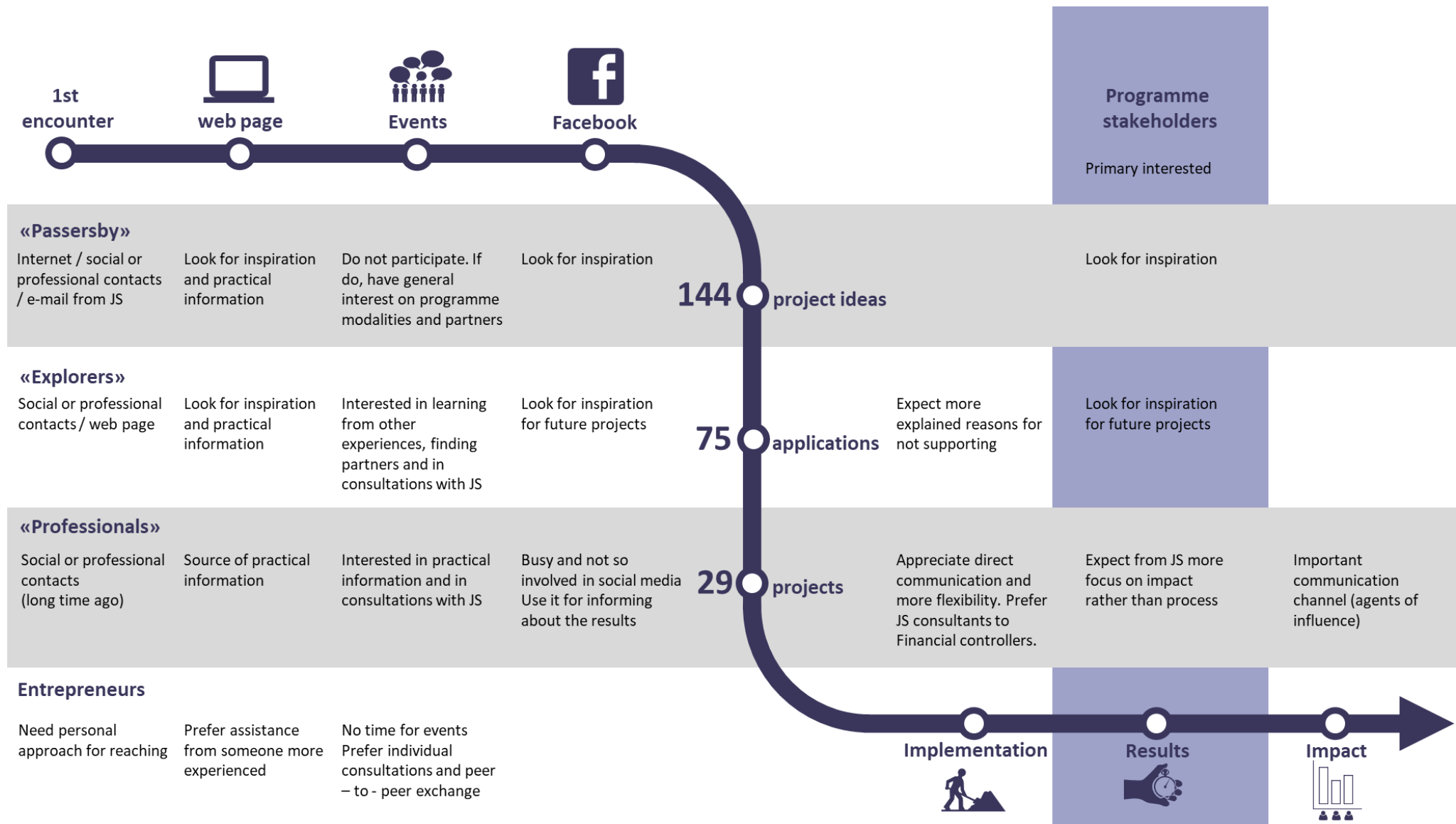
Another general recommendation mentioned was the need to assess application of the reporting requirements in Latvia and Estonia, and to ensure unified interpretation of the requirements.

Attention was drawn to the need to involve the Financial Controllers in the partner seminars where specific reporting questions were discussed. This could help to avoid differences between the explanations made in the seminars and further requests made by the Financial Controllers.

Some recommendations were mentioned regarding specific templates and documentation, that would help the beneficiaries:

- It would be advisable to develop templates for the most common procurement types, to ensure more efficient process of procurement and avoid mistakes;
- It would be helpful to develop a methodology how to calculate participants of the event, where it was not possible to acquire signatures of all participants, since it appears *“unfair to accept only those who have signed a list”*.

6.3. Target groups and their needs



Picture 27: Journey map of the Programme target groups and their needs

For the purpose of this evaluation, three main types of persons/organisations reached by the Programme's communication have been classified. Each group has their own needs and expectations from the Programme.

«Passersby»

This is the largest group, that represents persons and organisations which have interest in the Programme. This group uses some of the Programme's communication channels (mostly web page and Facebook), but remains in passive position, e.g. they do not become Facebook followers). Passersby are interested in inspiration for future projects, and Programme in general. The main reasons hindering them from active involvement (e.g., participation in Programme events, consultations with the JS, submission of project idea) is lack of capacity, lack of experience, language problems and problems in finding eligible and trustable partners.

«Explorers»

This group represents persons and organisations that are actively looking for some funding opportunities. This group uses different communication channels of the Programme (e.g., web page, Facebook), participates in events and some of them submit project ideas. Explorers are interested in inspiration, examples of funded projects, technical information on Programme modalities, meeting potential partners and consultations with the JS on their project ideas. Main reasons for not succeeding with the supported ideas or proposals is insufficient capacity and experience, language problems and problems in finding eligible and trustable partners.

«Professionals»

This is the smallest group of persons and organisations with experience and capacity in implementation of various projects. Representatives of this group most often become Programme beneficiaries and have a record of implemented projects under various programmes. They see Programme as one of the sources for implementation of their ideas. They are mainly interested in technical information about Programme modalities, and would be interested to use the communication channels of the Programme as instruments for promoting the results of their projects.

The Programme has done very much in terms of reaching its potential applicants. From all the reached little more than 5% decided to act and 1,3% submitted project ideas and proposals. However, only 0,58% became beneficiaries of the Programme. Large proportion of «passersby» suggests that reasons might be related to factors, than the communication activities of the Programme. In the survey and interviews the beneficiaries most often referenced to such internal factors as lack of experience, language problems, limited abilities to pre-finance and implement projects, problems to find eligible and trusting partners. Also external factors, e.g., high competition, limited availability of funds, impact of the administrative reform in Estonia and Programme modalities were mentioned most often. Specific efforts might be considered to increase the capacity of the «explorers».

Since the Programme's funds have already been committed the stakeholders should pay more attention to the Programme's results and impact. The beneficiaries should be used as intermediaries and agents of influence, in order to inform about their results and experience. The JS together with the stakeholders should more focused to identify the changes achieved with the direct assistance of the Programme.

ANNEX 1

Abbreviations used in the report

Abbreviation	Term
Beneficiaries	Lead partners and partners of the supported projects under Estonia – Latvia Cross-border cooperation programme
JS	Joint Secretariat
«Others»	Persons who have been in any contact with the Joint secretariat regarding programme but have not submitted project idea or project proposal
Programme	Interreg V-A — Estonia–Latvia cross-border cooperation programme 2014-2020
«Rejected»	Contact persons of the submitted project ideas and projects that were not selected for financing
UK	United Kingdom

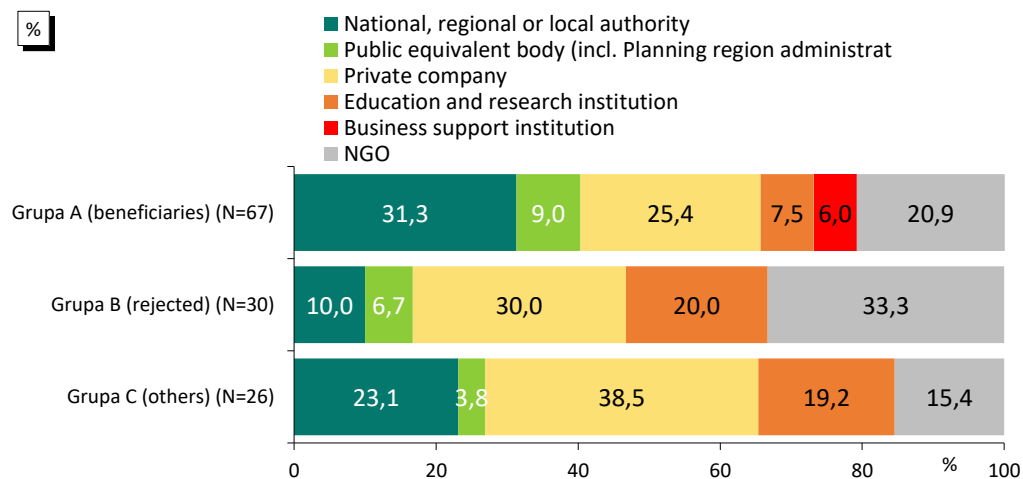
ANNEX 2

Technical information of the survey

The online survey was conducted in the period December 5 – 11, 2017 via online survey tool visidati.lv. Requests to participate in the survey were sent via email addresses provided by the JS on December 5, with remainder on December 8, 2017.

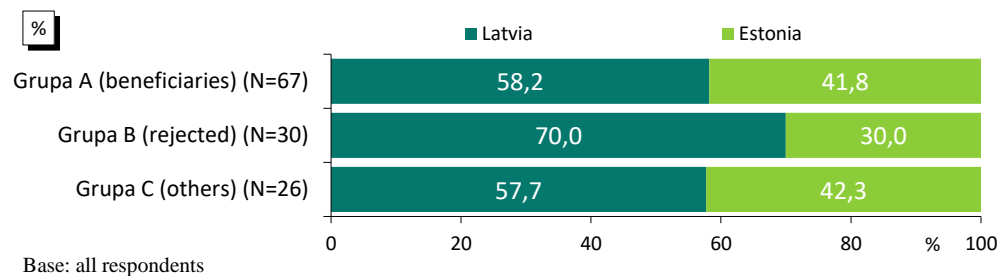
	Requests sent	Of those		Number of responses	% of responses
		Invalid emails	Valid emails		
Beneficiaries	203	9	194	67	34,53%
Rejected	122	13	109	30	27,52
Others	463	50	413	26	6,3%
Total	788	72	716	123	17,18%

Picture A1. Please select the type of your organisation



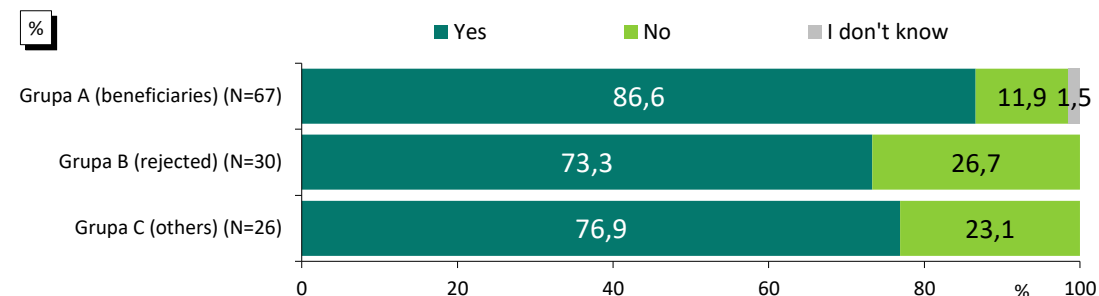
Base: all respondents

Picture A2. Please select the country of your organisation



Base: all respondents

Picture A3. Have you participated in any event about the Programme organised by Joint secretariat?



Base: all respondents

ANNEX 3

Technical information on interviews

Phone and face-to-face interviews were conducted in period November 28 – December 14, 2017.

Type of organisation	Country
1. Expert, umbrella organisation dealing with entrepreneurs	Latvia
2. Entrepreneur (tourism), beneficiary,	Latvia
3. NGO and umbrella organisation, beneficiary, tourism	Latvia
4. NGO, beneficiary, environment	Latvia
5. Municipality, beneficiary	Latvia
6. Entrepreneur (food processing), beneficiary,	Latvia
7. Expert, NGO/ academic, beneficiary	Latvia
8. Expert, two umbrella organisations - dealing with entrepreneurs and municipalities (planning region and other), beneficiary	Latvia
9. Expert, umbrella organisation - dealing with municipalities (planning region), rejected (partial interview)	Latvia

Type of organisation	Country
10. Public equivalent body (Foundation, environment), beneficiary,	Estonia
11. Education and research institution (also Business support institution to some extent), beneficiary and umbrella organisation (network linking the public sector, private industry, and educational and research institutions), entrepreneurship	Estonia
12. Education and research institution, beneficiary (public research and development authority), space technology and entrepreneurship	Estonia
13. Expert, Municipality, umbrella organisation	Estonia
14. Expert, beneficiary and umbrella organisation, entrepreneurship	Estonia
15. Expert, Municipality (County Development Centre), umbrella organisation	Estonia
16. Municipality (Development and Entrepreneurship Centre), beneficiary and an umbrella organisation	Estonia



Interreg
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