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MID-TERM (INTERIM) EVALUATION OF THE PROGRESS OF THE ASYLUM, MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION FUND'S OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME 2021- 2027

SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION



Lietuvos Respublikos
socialinės apsaugos
ir darbo ministerija



PMIF
Prieglobsčio, migracijos
ir integracijos fondas

SUBJECT, PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION

The main **objective of the evaluation was** to assess the progress of the implementation of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) Operational Programme for 2021-2027 (AMIF Operational Programme) in order to improve the quality of the programme and its management.

In order to achieve the main objective of the evaluation, the following three main **evaluation objectives** were implemented:

1. The progress of the implementation of the AMIF Operational Programme has been analysed and evaluated, and the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, European Union (EU) added value and other aspects of the AMIF Operational Programme investments were identified in the Better Regulation Guidelines;
2. Management processes of the AMIF Operational Programme has been assessed;
3. Conclusions and recommendations on the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, EU added value and improvement of the management processes of the AMIF Operational Programme investments were presented.

The subject of this evaluation is The Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) Operational Programme 2021-2027.

40.1 million EUR (EU and co-financing) is planned to be allocated for the implementation of the AMIF Operational Programme of which 38.4 million EUR is earmarked for the implementation of activities in line with the objectives of the AMIF Operational Programme, and 1.7 million EUR is earmarked for technical assistance.

The evaluation was carried out on the basis of five main criteria: relevance, effectiveness, coherence, efficiency and EU added value.

The quantitative data required for the evaluation were collected from the State Data Agency, Eurostat, the Migration Department under the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania, the European Migration Network and other publicly available sources. The **qualitative insights** are based on thematic reviews and evaluations already carried out in the areas of asylum, migration and integration of third-country nationals, as well as on information obtained during interviews with project promoters and representatives of asylum institutions. Data from monitoring and projects implemented in the previous investment period (2014-2020), in addition to the 2021-2027 period, were also used.

The evaluation activities took place between 11th of December 2023 and 15th of March 2024. The evaluation was commissioned by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania (hereinafter referred to as MSSL).

The evaluation results are discussed below in relation to the specific criteria for evaluating public policy programmes.

RELEVANCE

The relevance criterion analysed the relevance of the objectives and actions of the AMIF Operational Programme to national and European Union objectives, as well as the extent to which these actions respond to existing problems of migration and integration of third-country (non-EU) nationals or stateless persons (hereafter referred to as third-country nationals), and to the needs of the target groups.

The AMIF Operational Programme was found to be in **line with all four specific objectives set out in the AMIF Regulation (EU) 2021/1147¹** (developing the CEAS; promoting effective integration; effective and dignified return and reintegration; enhancing solidarity between Member States of the EU) and the planned measures are targeted and respond to the current institutional needs and the needs of the target groups. The AMIF Operational Programme will also contribute to addressing the problems identified in the Lithuanian Migration Policy Guidelines² (insofar as this is in line with the objectives of the AMIF).

The AMIF Operational Programme addresses the key needs related to the main existing weaknesses in the reception system. It foresees funding for activities to improve accommodation facilities, to improve the quality and accessibility of essential services for asylum seekers, beneficiaries of asylum, returnees – services of translation, legal assistance, language training, employment, counselling, etc., and to improve the qualification of professionals working in the asylum system (including at local government level).

The descriptions of the AMIF Operational Programme and the documentation of the upcoming calls for proposals reflect an **orientation towards more integrated services and the search for new solutions** (especially in the areas of Lithuanian language training and translation services), which should contribute to systemic changes in improving the quality of integration services.

¹ Regulation (EU) 2021/1147 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2021 establishing the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund

² Government Resolution No. 79 of 22 January 2014 "On the Approval of the Lithuanian Migration Policy Guidelines"

One of the most pressing challenges facing the Republic of Lithuania in the field of migration in recent years is the accommodation of incoming third-country nationals. The AMIF Operational Programme foresees that additional sources of funding will be sought for the development of the accommodation infrastructure, and that the AMIF Operational Programme will focus on the renovation of the existing accommodation facilities and on the increase of the supply of alternative accommodation. As part of the AMIF Operational Programme, a contract has been signed at the end of 2023 for the expansion of the existing infrastructure of the Migrant Multifunctional Centre of the Foreigners' Registration Centre of the State Border Guard Service under the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania, creating 75 new places in the reception infrastructure, but other major infrastructure investments are/will be financed from other sources.³

Such additional funding for the development of reception infrastructure is of great value not only for improving reception conditions for third-country nationals, but also for allowing more funds from the AMIF Operational Programme to be used to improve the quality of integration of third-country nationals. This means that **there are preconditions for more and better quality interventions for the target groups in the period 2021-2027**. It is likely that more attention will be paid to integration in municipalities, which are responsible for the particularly important transition period when asylum seekers leave the Refugees Reception Centre or other accommodation and start living independently. In order to strengthen the role of municipalities in the integration process of third-country nationals, it is important to provide them with advice and to encourage the implementation of new forms of services that directly contribute to solving the most pressing problems of third-country nationals and to overcoming the fundamental barriers to integration. **It is RECOMMENDED to consider funding pilot projects to provide personal assistant or similar services to asylum seekers/families during their integration in the municipality.** This should be a limited period of direct assistance to help the person/family to deal independently with relevant issues related to health, education, integration into the labour market and society. Where possible, **it is RECOMMENDED to employ persons with good intercultural skills** (e.g. persons who are themselves culturally advanced third-country nationals who have integrated in Lithuania) to provide personal assistant or similar services. Furthermore, in order to develop an effective model for this type of service, it is **RECOMMENDED to monitor the achievements of the pilot projects and document the progress of the service implementation and any difficulties encountered.** On the basis of the information gathered and the experience gained, a **detailed description of the service should** be drawn up at the end of the projects, which could then be used for the development of the service in municipalities.

³ In 2023, a project directly funded by the European Commission (EC) under the AMIF will provide additional housing for about 2.2 thousand people in 22 municipalities; in early 2024, the EC also approved an application submitted by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania together with its partners, which will provide additional funding of almost 10 million EUR for the development of reception infrastructure.

In order to improve the efficiency of the use of the AMIF funds and to **increase the targeting of integration services, it is important to define more precisely the target groups of the interventions financed where possible**. The preamble to the AMIF Regulation (EU) 2021/1147 states that "the Fund should support measures tailored to the needs of third-country nationals, usually implemented in the early stages of integration, <...> while interventions targeting third-country nationals with a longer-term impact should be financed by the ESF+ and the ERDF". In order to better target integration services and enhance their impact in the first years of integration, **it is RECOMMENDED that at least part of the integration measures under Objective 2 of the AMIF Operational Programme should be directly targeted at persons who have recently obtained residence permits for the first time**. It is **RECOMMENDED that** some highly specialised/personalised integration services, which are **in limited supply, should be financed by the AMIF only for beneficiaries of asylum**. The specific cases where it would be appropriate to narrow down the target group should be identified during the preparation of calls for proposals in consultation with the social partners.

EFFECTIVENESS

The complex and constantly evolving situation regarding the migration of third-country nationals in the period 2021-2022 has led to longer discussions and the need to revise previously planned actions in the area of reception and asylum, which has led to the preparation of the AMIF Operational Programme taking longer time than planned. The AMIF Operational Programme was approved on 4th of September 2022 (EC Decision C(2022)6488). The first call for proposals closed (applications were submitted) on 26th of September 2023. A total of 7 calls have been launched and 2 project contracts have been signed until 15th of February 2024. **The achievement of the monitoring indicators had not yet been recorded at the time of the evaluation**. Accordingly, the effectiveness criterion does not assess the current degree of achievement of the objectives of the AMIF Operational Programme, but rather the factors that may affect the implementation of the Programme.

The success of the implementation of the AMIF Operational Programme is closely linked to the political agenda and the regulatory environment. **The implementation of the AMIF Operational Programme is accompanied by changes in the legal framework of the asylum system at both EU and national level**: at EU level, the reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and at national level, the reform of the Migrant Reception and Accommodation System, which focuses on improving reception conditions for third-country nationals by consolidating reception functions in a single institution. These reforms will have a direct impact on the need for and the implementation of the projects financed under the AMIF Operational Programme: the reform of the solidarity mechanism at EU level may increase the number of persons resettled in the Republic of Lithuania; the institutional reform at national level will have a direct impact on the management of the reception infrastructure, and will lead

to some changes in the functions of some of the institutions of the system, which may require new competences and qualifications for the professionals of these institutions.

Achieving the objectives of the AMIF Operational Programme will also depend to a large extent on migration flows, which are difficult to predict due to the uncertainties surrounding the Russian war in Ukraine and other, primarily geopolitical, factors. The abrupt changes in migration flows in the past have required increased financial resources and additional assistance and time for system adaptation. Importantly, the **AMIF Operational Programme has already been designed in the light of these lessons learned**, with a stronger focus on creating a pool of accommodation places, better adapting the public services provided in the country to the needs of third-country nationals, and the search for and implementation of automated solutions. This should make it easier to adapt to sudden changes in the number of asylum seekers and refugees, should this become relevant.

At the level of project implementation, there are typical factors that can prevent the implementation of planned activities. In the analysis of the experience of EU-funded projects in Lithuania, the main external factors that have posed risks to the achievement of the planned project results in recent years have been high inflation (especially the increase in construction prices), the disruption of planned training and other face-to-face activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the relatively rapid rise in wages, which has made it difficult for projects, especially those run by NGOs, to retain qualified staff. The main internal challenges are the conduct of public procurement (preparation of specifications, lengthy procedures, complaints about tender conditions and decisions taken) and the lack of human resources in project management. Cooperation between project promoters and the European Social Fund Agency (ESFA), which administers the AMIF support in Lithuania, is crucial to mitigate the negative impact of the latter factors. As the experience of the various programmes shows, there is already a certain **culture of cooperation in** which project promoters see the ESFA as a partner rather than a controller, and the **management and control system of the AMIF Operational Programme is based on many years of experience**, and the **projects under the AMIF Operational Programme are mostly implemented by experienced institutions and bodies**. This should help to overcome potential challenges that may arise during project implementation.

COHERENCE

Coherence is understood as the internal and external coherence of the AMIF Operational Programme - the interventions planned and implemented should not be in conflict with each other, should not duplicate other interventions, and should work synergistically where possible.

The overall logic and coherence of the AMIF Operational Programme is appropriate, the Programme has been developed in a coherent manner in line with the provisions of the AMIF Regulation (EU) 2021/1147, with activities tailored to the needs of the main target groups.

In terms of internal coherence, it is important to note that the AMIF Operational Programme foresees the possibility of combining certain interventions under different objectives (e.g. jointly addressing the specific human resource constraints of the asylum system and the employment of third country nationals). If these actions are implemented through specific projects, synergies should be achieved.

However, it is important to note that there are certain **risks of lack of investment compatibility related to the existing legal framework** (the Law on the Legal Status of Foreigners and related legislation). The functions of the institutions and bodies involved in the reception system (the Migration Department under the Ministry of the Interior, the Refugee Reception Centre, the State Border Guard Service under the Ministry of the Interior, etc.) are not consistently aligned with the existing legislation, and some of the institutions carry out functions that are not specific to them. Investments in an underperforming reception system may reduce the potential impact of the AMIF fund. However, it is expected that these challenges will be addressed at national level through the implementation of the reform of the Migrant Reception and Accommodation System⁴.

The coherence of the AMIF Operational Programme with other sources of funding is at least partly ensured by the National Strategic Management Framework⁵. This framework must already assess, at the planning stage, the extent to which measures implemented by other appropriation managers could contribute to solving problems in a given area of public governance. Meanwhile, the coordination between the current activities financed by the State budget and those financed by the AMIF is in most cases done at the level of the managing authority of the appropriation - the MSSL at national level, which is also the managing authority of the AMIF Operational Programme and is responsible for many of the services financed by the State budget that are also available to third country nationals.

In terms of compatibility with other sources of funding, the aim of **the AMIF Operational Programme to align AMIF-supported actions with ESF+ interventions is also considered to be positive**. In practice, the external coherence of the AMIF Operational Programme with other funding sources will depend mainly on the conditions set out in the specific calls for proposals. The current general description of the AMIF Operational Programme shows that some of the activities to be supported (health care services for the target group, support for labour market integration, promotion of entrepreneurship) are also to a certain extent financed

⁴ At the time of preparation of the evaluation report (December 2023 - February 2024), amendments to the legislation necessary for the implementation of the Concept for the Transformation of the Migrant Reception and Accommodation System are being discussed in the Seimas.

⁵ Law on Strategic Governance of the Republic of Lithuania, 25 June 2020, No XIII-3096.

from the state budget or ESF+ funds. Therefore, in order to ensure complementarity of funding sources and efficient use of the AMIF funds, it will be important to finance those activities which are complementary in specific aspects to the services provided by the Employment Service under the MSSL or by other entities to third-country nationals, without duplicating them. **It is RECOMMENDED that the documentation for the call for proposals should assess in great detail whether the integration activities to be financed are similar to other publicly funded services that could be used**, possibly with additional support, by third-country nationals. Furthermore, in order to increase the accessibility of public services to third-country nationals and to enable public service staff to perform their functions well, **it is RECOMMENDED that the funds of the AMIF be invested in the preparation of methodological and informative material on the specificities of the services provided to third-country nationals in specific areas (employment services, social services, personal health care, etc.), in the preparation, organisation of training courses for specialists in these areas, and in providing them with practical advice.**

Specific and comprehensive efforts are needed to integrate non-Lithuanian pupils, especially those who do not speak English or Russian, into mainstream education institutions. **It is RECOMMENDED to consider, together with the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania, the possibility to use the AMIF funds to contribute to a smoother integration of third-country nationals of school age into the Lithuanian education system by providing additional targeted support to general education schools with no experience in educating non-Lithuanian children of non-Lithuanian descent, who do not speak Lithuanian.** Possibilities should be considered, *for example*, to complement the services of personal assistants, intercultural consultants or similar services recommended to be financed by the AMIF in municipalities with targeted assistance to help third-country nationals integrate into educational institutions; to finance the activities of a centralised methodological education consultation point or similar; to encourage and enable initiatives by non-governmental organisations by offering direct volunteer assistance to schools in the reception and education of third-country nationals; and so on.

EFFICIENCY

The efficiency criterion is designed to assess whether the planned objectives will be achieved with optimal resources, i.e. the ratio of financial, personnel, time or similar inputs to the results achieved. As the AMIF Operational Programme is in its infancy and there is no evidence of costs incurred at project level, and in the light of the evaluation questions presented in the Technical Specification, the main focus is targeted on assessing the adequacy of the existing procedures and practices in optimising the costs of project administration.

The projects under the AMIF Operational Programme are still in their early stages of implementation, so there is no concrete data on the progress of project administration.

However, given that the procedures for financing and administering projects under the AMIF Operational Programme are almost in all respects in line with those applicable to projects financed by other EU funds, and that the existing system has been in use, with minor changes, for more than the first investment period, it is fair to say that **there are no major obstacles which would significantly increase the administrative burden on project promoters.**

The simplified expenditure mechanism, which has already been introduced for the 2014-2020 investment period, has good potential to reduce the administrative burden related to the reporting of project expenditure. The AMIF Operational Programme already **applies certain simplified cost rates, but some small actions are still subject to detailed accounting, each of which must be documented.**

In order to reduce the administrative burden on the AMIF Operational Programme project promoters and the ESFA, and to increase the efficiency of the implementation of the AMIF-financed interventions, it is **RECOMMENDED to consider the possibility of introducing fixed fees for** activities such as meals, hygiene measures, updating the fixed fee for the integration package, etc.

EU ADDED VALUE

The EU added value analysis has shown the added value of the AMIF Operational Programme compared to what would have been achieved by national action alone.

Many of the activities supported by the AMIF are legally mandated and compulsory, but if the AMIF funding were to be withdrawn, these services are likely to be delivered at a reduced scale and of a lower quality. However, the **EU's added value is most evident in the research, monitoring activities and training of professionals in the field of the asylum system** - without support for these activities, it would be difficult for the State to ensure structural changes, such as a greater role for municipalities in the integration process of third-country nationals, in the development of public services and in making them more relevant and accessible to the needs of third country nationals. Equally important is the fact that the **AMIF funds enable and encourage partnerships between the public sector and NGOs**, which is particularly relevant given that NGOs have a wealth of experience, which results in their significant contribution to the various activities implemented in the Lithuanian asylum system.

Continuing to initiate and sustain long-term and sustainable systemic change by expanding the diversity of integration services and providers **is essential** to increase the EU's added value in the field of integration of third-country nationals. One of the potential resources that has not yet been exploited is local community-based organisations. **It is RECOMMENDED that the AMIF funds be used to provide local community organisations with training, advice and practical ideas on how to increase the inclusion of third-country nationals in** local development projects (funded through ESF+) initiated and implemented in their area. In order

to improve the accessibility of integration services to all groups of third-country nationals, **it is also RECOMMENDED to encourage community-based initiatives in particular to contribute to the integration of target groups that are not involved in labour market-oriented integration measures** (e.g. women who are not in employment, women with children, etc.).