

**Annual meeting**

Date: June 18, 2018 at 11:00 – 14:05

Venue: Ministry of Finance, Suur-Ameerika 1, Tallinn, Room „Kask/Kõiv“

Added:

1. agenda of the meeting
2. list of participants

11:00-11:15 Opening remarks by the Head of National Focal Point and delegations;

The Annual Meeting was opened by the Head of National Focal Point (*NFP*), the Deputy Secretary-General for Fiscal Policy of the Ministry of Finance of Estonia Mrs Kaie Koskaru-Nelk with welcoming the participants and introducing the agenda of the meeting.

11:15-12:15 Implementation *status quo* of 2009-2014

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm from Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*NMFA*) gave her appreciation to NFP for the last period and opening the new period. The NMFA was pleased to see that all projects were finalized in time and commended NFP for the excellent work managing the grants in 2009-2014 period and especially implementation and bilateral relations.

Mr Marek Kübarsepp from NFP gave an overview of the last period and estimated the old period to be very useful. Mrs Monika Kont added that from the overall 11 programs only four are still open because of irregularity reports and they are going to be closed within next weeks. After that, it is possible to prepare the final strategic reports, which are expected to be done before autumn. Mr Marek Kübarsepp added that the last periods bilateral fund activities have all been finished and NFP has presented a draft strategic report already to FMO. Mrs Monika Kont asked if there should be another meeting for approval of the the closure documents.

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm commented that NMFA cannot approve the strategic report as this function is delegated to FMO it but NMFA commended the high quality of the report to be strategic and comprehensive. NMFA encouraged NFP to further impact oriented analyses for bilateral objectives on the national level in the future. Also to focus more on the presentation of flagship or projects with strong bilateral impact so that shared results and wider effects can be better presented and placed in the wider context.

Program Operators gave brief overview of the last period:

1) Mr Ülar Vaadumäe, from Ministry of Social Affairs of Estonia gave an overview of three programs (see also incl Slideshow):

* Public Health Initiatives (EE08):
  + Focus on mental health policy;
  + Donor contribution utilized 8,86 MEUR (97,4%);
  + 14 projects financed, of them 10 contracted via open calls.
* Mainstreaming Gender Equality and Promoting Work-Life Balance (EE09):
  + Focus on Public awareness raising, capacity building and cooperation between institutions at different levels in the private sector, academia, and civil society;
  + Donor contribution utilized 1,82 MEUR (91,1%);
  + 17 projects financed, of them 15 contracted via open calls.
* Domestic and Gender-based Violence (EE11)
  + Focus on public awareness and improving data on sexual and gender based violence and trafficking, better quality of training professionals and new services for victims of sexual violence;
  + Donor contribution utilized 1,86 MEUR (93,1%);
  + 10 projects financed, of them 7 contracted via open calls.

2) Mr. Tanel Tomson from Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications of Estonia:

Had one program (6,6 MEUR). The objective was to increase competitiveness of companies in Estonia and Norway. Final report has approved. Competition between companies was big, there were many applications from different companies. Also had different Norwegian partners and therefore good cooperation between Estonian and Norwegian companies. Hoped to reach 10 new technologies. Exceeded the target - 19 of the 27 technologies have been commercialized (i.e.Skeleton Technologies and Oil Spill detection system).

3) Mrs Krista Tõnisson from the Ministry of the Environment of Estonia (see also incl Slideshow):

Had one initiative: Integrated Marine and Inland Water Management.

* The objective was to achieve good environmental status in European marine and inland waters;
* Focusing on establishing environmental targets and management plans for marine and inland waters; improving environmental information of impact, status and trends; developing strategy and measures for adapting to climate changes;
* 6,9 MEUR;
* Had 4 pre-defined projects and 9 open-call projects.

4) Mrs Pille Pikker from Ministry of Education and Research of Estonia (see also incl Slideshow):

* EEA/Norway Grants Scholarship Programme, EE10:
  + budget 1,6 million euros;
  + 10 Cooperation Projects at upper secondary education level;
  + 20 mobility projects in the field of higher education.
  + In the mobility projects 9 Estonian HEIs cooperate with 23 higher education institutions and 8 other organizations in Norway.
* Norwegian-Estonian Research Cooperation Programme, EE06:
  + The Programme implemented through joint research projects, enabling researchers and the teams to bring together complementary skills, knowledge, and resources in order to jointly address research problems;
  + budget 3,3 million euros;
  + Very popular grant– 170 applications, 13 very high level projects were funded;
  + All research areas were represented: culture and society 6 projects;
  + Environment and biosciences – 3 projects;
  + Physical sciences and engineering – 2 projects;
  + Health – 2 projects
  + As a result - 14 high-quality joint scientific publications and in 49 high-quality internationally refereed scientific publications were produced.
  + 30 new scientific methods have been acquired by the Estonian researchers during the Programme

Mrs Monika Kont concluded that all projects have received their goals and we are proceeding with the ure of the programming period 2009-2014.

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm thanked the POs for their presentations and work with the programs. NFMA was pleased to see the progress made and the excellent results achieved in the period of 2009-2014 and encouraged Estonia to build good cooperation and good experiences and maintain the good spirit for the future in the matters of coordination and communication. She congratulated Estonia with the successful implementation and for consistently working to be the best practice example in the Grants implementation and strengthening bilateral relations. For the future, the donors underlined that they would like to have more strategic presentations of the results with the strategic impact as this is very important to know.

Mrs Anu Kikas gave an overview of the communication and publicity in the period of 2009-2014.

* Main channels for communication are:
  + Homepage www.eeagrants.fin.ee
    - Daily use varies 100-500 page visits
    - Updated information about ongoing and coming events
    - All documents (legislation)
    - English and Estonian languages
  + Social media page „EEA and Norway Grants Estonia“
    - More than 300 followers
    - Synced information from homepage
* Public awareness:
  + Decreasing trend in public awareness that are related EAA and Norway grants. We can see same trend with EU Structural funds.
  + Must take into account that actions are varying in different periods – it can affect in some point.
  + In period 2014-2016, different survey companies made public awareness survey.
  + Question that was asked (age group 18-74): “Have you heard anything about EAA/Norway grants?”.
* Program operators and partners organized many different events in 2016.
  + Examples
    - Public health program was represented in very popular event called public opinion festival;
    - Study tour to Norway, which was focused to Estonian and Norwegian entrepreneurs for encouraging bilateral relations;
    - Study tours to five manor schools called „Manor school for all“.
* All partners are interested in cooperation and we believe we have very strong bilateral relations.
  + Children and Youth at Risk;
  + EEA Scholarship Programme;
* Most of the programs have organized program-closing seminar/event, only public health program made open call launch event in 2016.
* Communication activities in 2017:
  + New financial period launch event in Tallinn;
  + Special wrap-up video of last financial period;
  + Communication strategy for new financial period;
  + Homepage structural changes (content);
  + Knowledges exchange with colleagues from Croatia and Bulgaria.

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm thanked for the good communication achieved and the Donors see the good communication as high priority and particularly in the end of period. The Donors believe that there is still room for improvement when it comes to awareness in Estonia and urge Estonia to hold strong focus on the impact. New logos and new identities should have been in use from 2017 autumn and hopefully they are on board now.

Bilateral funds:

Mr Marek Kübarsepp gave an overview of the bilateral fund activities and changes during the period. The beginning was a little slow on program level and there were many small activities (i.e seminars changing the fields in different areas). The biggest event and highlight project for the bilateral fund (budget more than 50% of the funds) was the E-governance program and the other good example project was Estonian-Norwegian Swimming Federation cooperation.

Bilateral funds budgeting on the state level was on ad hoc principle but in practice, there were used open calls and public procurement.

Lessons learned: if we continue to use ad hoc principle on national level then we should use more focused open calls or rather targeted calls. For the new period, we are developing new approach to use bilateral funds more effective level. In addition, some program operators activated in the end of the programming period and the challenge is to help the program operators to start at the beginning of the period so that we should have better ideas for projects. Bilateral funds have an important role in enhancing cooperation between the Donors and Estonia.

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm clarified the information about the open calls and explained that the Donors see the ad hoc principle to be most suitable. The Donors see that there are many good practices in bilateral relations but there are still unexplored possibilities that can strengthen the bilateral relations between Norway, Liechtenstein, Island and Estonia.

The Ambassador to the Royal Norwegian Embassy, Mr Dagfinn Sorli specified if the information about changing the ad hoc principle would somehow influence the draft work plan which was agreed in the Joint Committee for the Bilateral Funds (JCBF).

Mr Marek Kübarsepp confirmed that it would not influence the draft work plan agreed.

Mrs Monika Kont called the annual meeting of 2009-2014 to an end and after lunch will be proceeded with the annual meeting of period 2014-2021.

*12:15-13:00 Lunch in* *the Ministry of Finance* *(Suur-Ameerika 1, Tallinn)*

13:00-14:30 Implementation *status quo* of2014-2021

Mrs Monika Kont introduced the agenda for the second part of the annual meeting: the first topic will be the status of preparation and implementation of program period of 2014-2021. The second topic will be an overview of bilateral activities followed by the issues of communication (incl. communication strategy). Finally reforming the system of National Focal Point.

1. **The status of programme preparation/implementation of 2014-2021**

Mrs Monika Kont gave a short overview of Estonian system. There are 4 programmes in Estonia:

* Ministry of Economic Affairs is responsible for EE Innovation programme. The Programme Agreement has been signed already (26.04.2018). Calls for applications are planned to be opened in autumn.
* Ministry of Education is responsible for Baltic Research Programme where the first call for applications is planned to take place in October-November. The Programme Agreement will be signed during today’s evening reception.
* Ministry of Social Affairs has prepared Local Development and Poverty Reduction programme where Concept Note has been agreed but some issues are still open before the Agreement could be signed – related restructuring of the system. The aim is to clarify everything and to sign the programme in July-August.
* Ministry of Environment has prepared a Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation programme concept note. The signing of the programme has been delayed and the Concept Note has not been agreed yet although the document was sent to the FMO already in February - the substantial feedback was first time received in the end of May. NFP urges the FMO to help to finalize the Concept Note and start preparing the Programme Agreement from their side because the latest deadline for signing it should be August.

Estonia can’t start implementation of the programmes before the Concept Notes are agreed and Agreements are signed as well as the descriptions of the management and control systems are ready and audited.

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm thanked of the overview and noted that good partnership that has been established is very good starting point to the implementation. The NMFA suggest to establish a solid implementation structure and use the experiences of previous period and transfer of knowledge.

She also encouraged to further work on developing bilateral relations and finalizing the Work Plan of bilateral funds. The NMFA supports strategic initiatives beyond the programmes.

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm also thanked Estonians for submitting a communication plan in time. It is a good platform and should be kept as a living document.

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm brought out that on climate change programme there will be a technical meeting on Friday, 22th of June.

Mrs Monika Kont emphasized that since the holiday season is coming, it is crucial that all parties (NFP, FMO, Ministry of Environment) put their efforts on finalizing the preparations of the climate change programme so that the agreement could be signed in August.

Mrs Tori Hoven from FMO assured that on their side they will do the best to help to run everything smoothly even it it is not possible to promise any dates at the moment.

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm raised a question concerning the EE Innovation programme and asked if it was possible to launch it on the 15th of October in connection to the potential visit of Norwegian Prime Minister.

Mrs Monika Kont explained the situation of preparing the agreement of the EE Innovation programme. Since there has been a delay in submitting the description of the management and control system by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, it is a bit complicated to make all the preparations for signing the agreement in mid-October. Before the call could be launched, the MCS description must get the approval from NFP and to be audited by the Audit Authority. For AA it is crucial to receive the description latest at end of July..

Mr Kaur Siruli, the head of the Audit Authority added that they can do their compliance assessment in august and if the NFP has made its comments and corrections before that then probably the work load for audit is not too heavy.

Mr Tanel Tomson from the Ministry of Economic Affairs promised to submit the description of the management and control systems to the NFP in coming days.

1. **Overview of bilateral activities**

Mr Marek Kübarsepp gave an overview of the status of the Bilateral Fund. The agreement was signed already in 2017 and one of the influencers of the quick agreement was Estonian Presidency. The donors were especially happy for 2 initiatives carried out in the frames of Bilateral Fund. The first one was "*The Kingdom of Norway and the Republic of Estonia – strengthening the digital cooperation"* and the second was "4th Eastern Partnership Business Forum” – Conference on the *“Role of Media in shaping public opinions in Eastern Partnership countries. Case of Ukraine: Challenges and Benefits of European Integration” IA –Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership"* which will have a follow-up activities planned for this year also.

Mr Marek Kübarsepp also added that the Joint Committee for the Bilateral Funds (JCBF) was established last year and there have been 4 meetings of the committee. There is one project in the queue that will be presented to the Joint Committee in September or October. The project is the next phase of Eastern Partnership Project. At the moment the description of the project is being prepared.

The Work Plan of JCBF has been agreed except for one technical question. The priority fields have been agreed with the donors. The funds still to be allocated are 274 000 euros (of the whole budget of 1 360 000 euros). The reserve is 425 000 euros for 2 years. So the absorption of the funds has been quick. We are looking forward for more focused and strategically oriented projects.

Mrs Sarolta Varnai added that since the Work Plan of Bilateral Funds has just been agreed we are in the process of gathering additional project ideas from Programme Operators and also other strategically relevant ideas.

1. **Communication and publicity activities for 2014-2021**

Mrs Anu Kikas gave and overview of the planned activities.

There will be a launch event in autumn (covering all programmes) but it has not been decided yet what is the format for that event. One option would be to organize an event, the other to have a special insert within some newspaper.

There are many new staff dealing with grants and for them a network meeting will be organized in autumn.

In autumn, a special TV show will air in Estonian Television. It will start in September and consist of 16 episodes, covering 15 Estonian counties + one episode to wrap the topics up. The series cover both structural funds and Norwegian/EEA grants (3-4 projects).

Mrs Sarolta Varnai added that FMO would submit its official comments on the communication strategy in coming weeks.

Mrs Maari Helilaid asked about the donors’ experience in Estonia’s presidency project within the Bilateral Fund.

Mr Tønnes Svanes from the NMFA said that the experience was very positive and especially because the project could start soon. It was a good example of bilateral communication.

1. **Reforming of the system of National Focal Point**

Mrs Maari Helilaid gave an overview of the planned activities in restructuring the Managing Authority of structural funds and the National Focal Point. The aim of restructuring is to make the implementation less bureaucratic and more applicant friendly. The new structure should also secure the proper and fluent implementation and granting the support. Therefore, it has been decided by the Estonian Government to bring together all the grants that are implemented today by the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and by Enterprise Estonia. The units will be united in the State Shared Service Center (SSSC) from the 1st of September 2018.

After moving to SSSC, the NFP will start formal negotiations with Donors and FMO on modification of the Norway/ EEA Grant system that will lead to the new setup and elaboration of official changes in the legal documents that will be presented to FMO (MoU, PO agreements, NFP MCS etc) later in this year.

After the new structural setup is fixed on SSSC, the Audit Authority will re-assess the changes and will give an audit opinion, which will be presented to FMO. During auditing process, no payment claims will be submitted. No changes will be made to the period 2009-2014.

Until legal changes have been approved, the head on NFP will be in MoF, who will ensure that all the functions/ obligations are filled. MoF will be in close communication with the Donors and FMO. The staff will remain the same.

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm expressed that the wish to make the grants’ system more efficient both for the state and the applicants is acceptable. It is the state’s decision how to build up its implementation system. However, the donors have some concerns regarding the changes.

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm brought up the issue about the description of the system described in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), in Annex A which will be in conflict with the changes. The donors see that the structure needs to remain in place until the new agreement has been signed. For that, a dialogue is needed between the NFP and the donors.

Estonia has proposed the new structure and has asked for opinion of the donors whether it is in accordance with the legal documents. The description of the new structure is still unclear for the donors.

Mrs Sarolta Varnai brought out several questions the donors have but assured that the questions will be submitted also in written form. The donors have not got an exhaustive answers about who would be responsible for planning, monitoring, evaluation, who would be the strategic partner for donors in the negotiation process, who will be the head of the NFP etc.

Mrs Maari Helilaid and Mrs Monika Kont explained that the State Budget Department of MoF will remain responsible for planning, monitoring, evaluation and the head of the NFP will be the Deputy Secretary-General of the MoF as long as the formal changes to legal acts have been done. After that the role will be moved to Deputy Director of SSSC. All answers will be given in written form.

Mrs Pia Gjasme Holm emphasized that since the whole structure has been agreed in the MoU, changing it would seriously affect the agreement.

Mr Kaur Siruli commented the question from the Audit Authority’s perspective and assured that the auditors do not see a problem in changing the system. The content of the change is reasonable and the only question is how to reflect the changes also technically in legal documents. The Audit Authority is of opinion that the content of the system remains the same.

Mrs Pia Gjesme Holm concluded that there were still questions concerning the new structure and how to resolve things technically. She suggested to step into formal dialogue in order to clarify the questions.

Mrs Monika Kont promised to send answers in written form after receiving the questions from FMO, including updated organigram. She concluded with the hope for resolving the problems and to come to an agreement.

1. **Any other business**

Mrs Monika Kont brought up that both donors and Estonian side emphasize the importance of cooperation and dialogue, yet one part of the donors – Iceland and Lichtenstein have not participated in annual meetings nor other meetings. She suggested that for better cooperation all donors should meet the Estonian NFP and other officials implementing Norway/EEA grants.

With that Mrs Monika Kont called the annual meeting to an end.