

FFWD Europe Action Plan for the Region of Podlaskie



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Development Fund



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An interregional cooperation project for improving SME competitiveness policies.

Project Partners

Normandy Development Agency (FR)

Investment and Business Development Bank Lower Saxony – NBank (DE)

Murcia Business Innovation Center (BIC Murcia) (ES)

IFKA Public Benefit NonProfit Ltd. For the Development of the Industry (HU)

Metropolitan City of Turin (IT)

Kaunas Science and Technology Park (LT)

Podlaska Regional Development Foundation (PL)

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Summary of the project

The project “Fast Forward Europe” contributes to the specific objective of Interreg Europe which relates to the creation, development and growth of small and medium-sized enterprises. In the case of Podlaskie, it is achieved by influencing the policy of the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodship in scope of activities supporting SMEs. The recommendations for a policy change result from interregional learning which occurred in the course of project implementation in Phase 1. Involvement of project employees and different stakeholders from Podlaskie whose scope of activity is in line with three project areas of interest, i.e. acceleration models, access to finance, internationalization. It is crucial that regional authorities and business support players respond to the key obstacles that obstruct businesses on their path to growth. However, this might be difficult to deal with if they lack know-how. Thanks to the good practices gathered by project partners, interregional learning events, staff exchange, the stakeholders from Podlaskie had an opportunity to see successful solutions from other countries. Therefore, they were involved in the policy change from the beginning. The progress of the implementation of the recommendations from Phase 1 will be monitored in Phase 2.

Abstract

The action plan present actions that will be undertaken by Podlaska Regional Development Foundation and the stakeholders involved in the project “Fast Forward Europe”. i.e. Podlaski Equity Investment Fund, Bialystok Science and Technology Park and finally the Marshal’s Office of Podlaskie Voivodship which is responsible for the development and implementation of the Regional Operational Program. The ideas come directly from interregional learning that occurred in the course of project implementation, i.e. from the Spanish good practice “Foreign Promotion Plan” and were shaped into two actions.

As an added value to FFWD project, inspiration from the Italian good practice entitled “Mentoring for international growth” currently is being transferred into ROP for the new financial perspective 2021-2027.

Introduction of the project partners transferring the good practice and the partners who shared their good practice

Partner transferring the good practice:

Podlaska Regional Development Foundation (Poland): The mission of Podlaska Regional Development Foundation, founded in 1994, is to support economic development of the region, including entrepreneurship. The Foundation's activity takes place especially in the information and promotion field within Enterprise Europe Network, specialized business services focused on export, and additionally through its participation in the distribution of financial resources for establishment and development of companies. Support of entrepreneurship development is provided by guarantees, credit and capital investments. Moreover, PRDF as an institution participates in numerous international projects in the framework of transnational programs. To boost the development of the region, PRDF cooperates not only with regional politicians, decision-makers, key authorities and organizations responsible for regional development but also with enterprises and promising start-ups as the main actors responsible for sustaining the economic growth in Podlaskie.

Within "Fast Forward Europe" project, Podlaska Regional Development Foundation cooperates with three stakeholders:

Marshal's Office of Podlaskie Voivodship – The mission of the Marshal's Office of Podlaskie Voivodship is to create a friendly, well-organised, modern, and efficient council that carries out tasks of the local government's institutions regarding socio-economic development of Podlaskie Voivodship and meeting needs of its community. The task of the Council is to support the Voivodship Board (executive powers) and Sejmik of Podlaskie Voivodship (legislature) in the execution of Development Strategy of Podlaskie Voivodship. Realisation of the regional innovation policy development is the area of competence of the Department of Regional Development together with the Department of Innovation and Entrepreneurship and the Department of the European Social Fund. The institution derived much inspiration from its participation in the exchange of good practices that can be introduced in the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodship 2021-2027.

Bialystok Science and Technology Park – The objective of the institution is to create an infrastructure that will favour increasing of innovativeness among local and regional enterprises, as well as to improve attractiveness of the city to new, new-technologies-based investments. Its tasks include: incubating young companies and offering support services to innovative companies; stimulating collaboration between enterprises, academics and researchers; leasing office and laboratory space, as well as a service area to developing enterprises and R&D units at preferential rates; managing investment areas; attracting investors. The Park was interested in learning from other project partners in order to improve its potential in the field of acceleration of enterprises.

Podlaski Equity Investment Fund Ltd. – It is one of the oldest venture capital funds in Poland. It was established in 1995 in the framework of Polish-British Program of Entrepreneurship

Development. The owner of the Fund is Podlaska Regional Development Foundation. First investments were made on the basis of the British experts' experience. Since the beginning of its existence, it has made numerous investments of the total value of 41 mln PLN (ca. 10 mln EUR). Thanks to the project, the Fund was able to participate in the exchange of knowledge in the field of financial support. Exchange of good practices and obtained knowledge about new tools and methodologies will help to offer better financial services to SMEs.

Partner who shared the good practice:

Regional Development Office of the Region of Murcia: - It is part of Region of Murcia, one of the autonomous communities of Spain responsible for the development of the region including international issues, international promotion and implementation of regional funding scheme.

Metropolitan City of Turin (Italy): It is a wide second level local authority that is responsible for organizing the structure of the coordinated systems for the management of the public services. Other key activities performed by its departments are protection and enhancement of water and energy resources, enhancement of cultural heritage, transport planning, protection of flora and fauna, hunting and fishing management (inland waters), air and noise pollution and waste disposal (including waste water).

Policy context

The Action Plan aims to impact:

- **Investment for Growth and Jobs Programme**
- European Territorial Cooperation Programme
- Other regional development policy instrument

The policy instrument addressed in this action plan is the Regional Operational Programme for Podlaskie Voivodeship 2014-2020 (hereinafter referred to as "ROP"). ROP is the instrument mentioned in *Podlaskie Voivodeship Development Strategy 2020*. It consists of 10 priority axes which aim at regional sustainable growth. The main aim of the Program is to increase the competitiveness of the regional economy shaped on the basis of regional specializations. It states that economic growth should be supported especially by influencing SME development. In the framework of ROP, this issue is included in 2 priorities:

- Activity 1.3 Supporting investments in enterprises, Investment priority 3c: Supporting of creation and development, and extending of advanced capabilities in scope of products and services development;
- Activity 1.4 Promotion of entrepreneurship and improvement of investment attractiveness, Investment priority 3a: Promotion of economic usage of new ideas and supporting of creation of new companies also by incubators.

In the framework of Activity 1.3, support is given to the undertakings which are to increase competitiveness on the national and international level, i.e. support is directed at enhancing innovation potential of the SME sector which contributes to the introduction of new products and services, and undertaking export activities. An increase in this innovation potential of enterprises in Podlaskie should help them become more competitive on foreign markets, where they will be able to sell products and services created in the region. Becoming more competitive may also result from lower costs of conducting business activities, better work efficiency, and effectiveness of the manufacturing process. The development of innovation potential may be achieved by introducing new products, processes, ways of organization and marketing. The activity entails funds and loans addressed to innovative solutions. Another aspect that is supported here is a greater use of ICT in enterprises, e.g. by implementing, extending, modernizing IT systems.

The latter activity (1.4) aims at shaping innovation-friendly business environment. First of all, it is necessary to constantly adjust the services offered by business support organizations. This entails the creation and development of business infrastructure, including business incubators, centers supporting academic entrepreneurship, specialized services. Crucial issue is to implement market demand model in this field. As it is planned to support business at the early stage of development, *seed capital* is also included in this activity. Secondly, it is required to make investment areas more accessible. Thirdly, it is necessary to ensure economic promotion, promotion of investment in the region and promotion of the internationalization as an important factor of the economic growth of the region.

It is clearly visible that there is still some place for improvement in the regional policy that will ensure growth of SMEs. Thanks to the involvement of regional stakeholders in the project “Fast Forward Europe” from the beginning, the issues presented in this action plan are not only some recommendations given by a business support organization being one of the project partners. The main stakeholder, which is also the Managing Authority of the Regional Operational Program had an opportunity to see the source of these recommendations, as well as to acquire interregional learning. Therefore, it was possible to decide which international good practices are relevant for the region, and possible to introduce in the program.

[Recommended: include here endorsement letters from the stakeholders]



Background of the project

The project FFWD Europe intends to improve the regional policies focusing on SMEs rapid growth thanks to exchanges of good practices at the policy level. Podlaska Regional Development Foundation was selected to participate in the project entitled “Fast Forward Europe” as it is involved in the improvement of the regional operational program by participating in the Monitoring Committee of the Regional Operational Program. Furthermore, the Foundation has got experience in distributing ERDF grants, operates a loan fund, and has implemented numerous projects supporting internationalization of SMEs. The project brought together 7 international partners with different expertise willing to share experience in order to identify the best existing practices (phase 1), to learn from each other (phase 1) and to review and adapt policies in order to implement them on new territories (phase 2).

In Phase 1, the partners had an opportunity to present their best practices in scope of three thematic areas – access to finance, internationalization and acceleration. Thanks to the involvement of stakeholders who have a real influence on the regional policy instrument, it was possible to identify which international programs have potential to be implemented in Podlaskie. Knowledge and understanding of good practices was then deepened during three staff exchange events. As a result, PRDF and stakeholders agreed which activities should be undertaken to enhance the competitiveness of local enterprises. Due to exchange of experience new activities were activated and FFWD program results had influence their shape.

Findings of research

In order to verify that internationalization and export itself and tailor made expertise is a proper supporting measure for SMEs in Podlaskie voivodship, Podlaska Regional Development Foundation decided to carry out relevant research. The study of the needs of local entrepreneurs was commissioned for another organization selected from the market.

The task of the selected contractor was to develop a report. The survey was done on the basis of computer-assisted telephone interviewing in July-August 2019. The first group of respondents comprised 15 companies that participated in “Hub of Talents” acceleration programme. Another group comprised 15 companies that have never participated in advisory and mentoring initiatives.

It results from the research that the majority of companies which participated in “Hub of Talents” (73%) do not intend to apply for any external funding in forthcoming 6 months. However, it does not mean that the companies do not need financing at all. Two respondents declared that they are looking for a strategic investor and a bank loan. One respondent declared that they are looking for venture capital, financing from the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development, financing from the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodship, or support from business angels. No project participants are looking for support offered by accelerators, the European Commission, or crowdfunding. It seems that the reason of it is limited access to external funds for start-ups at this stage of development (active for a

few years), as compared to programs targeted at entrepreneurs who are starting their activity. What is more, the survey demonstrates that the companies that participated in “Hub of Talents” have problems with **finding international contacts**. **Therefore, it is recommended to include this aspect in the calls for proposals in frames of ROP**. The need to introduce changes in program is justified by the respondents asked about their opinion about the barriers of internationalization. They **need more knowledge about foreign clients and markets, and how to deal with competition**. On the other hand, they do not perceive a foreign language as a barrier. **It is verified by the study that the aspect of legal conditions should be included in the advisory program**. A lack of knowledge of foreign law is the most often mentioned barrier of internationalization. **Other aspects important for entrepreneurs that could be included in the revised program are: selecting clients, adherence to the law, promotion, business model, patent counselling, post-sales service**. Therefore, it is justified to launch a public-funded program which should be tailored to its participants. Nevertheless, it should be not time-consuming for entrepreneurs.

Among the companies which have not participated in mentoring programs, 40% of respondents need support in **finding new international contacts**. 60% of respondents declared that they intended to apply for funds offered by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development, and the National Centre for Research and Development. This group of respondents perceive the following issues as barriers: **lack of knowledge about the foreign market, lack of experience, insufficient knowledge about clients**. Furthermore, the companies **expect support in scope of selecting partners and clients**. **Other expectations relate to: analysis of the foreign market, analysis of legal aspects, business model, negotiations, relations, establishment of a distribution and sales network**. Most of the respondents mentioned also knowledge about sources of financing (60%), obtaining new international business contacts (53%), knowledge about how to conduct a business (47%).

Besides PRDF is conducting research in frames of other EU funded projects as well as own research. In March 2016, PFRR conducted a survey on a sample of local enterprises (03.2016; 21 IDI). It shows that **trade fairs are perceived as the most important source of acquiring international contractors**. Unfortunately, many companies **cannot afford an independent stand at the fair**. The expected forms of support include: **information on available international industry events, search for funding for participation in fairs, logistic support at organization of trip, organization of a joint market stand, as well as "group" promotion of companies from the region of Podlaskie internationally**. Another issue confirming the rationality of the implementation of the indicated actions are the results of the research conducted by PFRR under the Interreg Europe SUPER Supporting eco-innovations towards international markets project (03.2017, 15 IDI). The study showed that despite high demand for external support in introducing innovations and starting international operations, access to support instruments is difficult, primarily due to the high degree of bureaucracy in the process of applying for funds and settlement of support, as well as due to the opacity of the system - companies, especially small ones, often have no competence, to appear independently in competitions, both at the supranational and national level, **and are not aware of the multitude of institutions and tools available in the region**.



Details of the Actions envisaged

The Actions envisaged to be implemented as a result of this action plan are presented below:

Action 1:

Relevance to the project (Action 1 and 2):

The action is inspired by good practice elaborated by Region of Murcia “Foreign Promotion Plan 2014-20 Region of Murcia”. FFWD partner from Spain, CEEIM, presented complex activities targeted at internationalization of regional companies. The purpose of this Program is to support local companies to carry out their diagnosis of competitive position and their potential for internationalization, as well as the preparation and execution of their international marketing plans to promote their introduction and consolidation in the foreign markets and the improvement of their competitiveness. The program includes a wide range of actions aimed to open new markets or the introduction of new products: participation in international fairs and exhibition events, promotional activities of the company abroad, international marketing actions, registration of patents and trademarks and implantations abroad.

In the meantime stakeholders of FFWD in Podlaskie region discussed on support of regional SMEs, including the way to not only raise export value but to support stable development on external market in complex way. Representatives of all stakeholders, including Marshall’s Office of Podlaskie Voivodeship participated in Interregional Learning Event in Murcia (October 2017), where they could gain knowledge and exchange the ideas regarding this program and practical ways of implementation which were inspiration for the undertaken action.

ROP of Podlaskie region in detailed documentation (Detailed Description of Priority Axes of ROP for Podlaskie for the years 2014-2020) gave the opportunity to open the call targeted at organisation of participation of trade fairs and company missions.

Marshall’s Office decided to open the call in 2018 and proposed the criteria for entities selection. The call gave the option of participation to single SMEs and groups of SMEs, which case, from the above mentioned analyses was of high demand. In March 2018 PRDF as the member of Monitoring Committee had the opportunity to consult and propose criteria satisfying the interested target group. Most of them were accepted. In the course of the project’s implementation, the Marshal’s office launched to activities which support SMEs aiming at internationalization. The first one is financing for the participation in fairs and trade missions, also abroad. Entrepreneurs can apply on their own or form a consortium. Participation in fairs is quite expensive for entrepreneurs; therefore, they often are forced to resign from the opportunity which can help in establishing new business relations and give an insight into the newest trends in the sector. Applying for financing in a consortium minimizes the costs connected with the purchase of exhibition space, stand, transport, etc. Gaining new business contacts can result in new orders, boosting sales, and consequently in the development of a company, which becomes competitive in the European market.

Nature of the action:

The recommendation for the action is to participate in the calls *1.4 Sub-measure 1.4.1 Promotion of entrepreneurship and increasing the investment attractiveness of the voivodship, type of project: fairs, missions and other international events* – for PRDF as the leader of the group of SMEs providing expertise, knowledge and experience to participants who needed support. Calls are opening in 1st quarter of each year beginning from 2018.

PRDF gathered 10 enterprises interested in participation as a group of food sector companies (smart specialization of the region) in SIAL trade fair in Paris, sharing the stand and promoting the region. Application was submitted in 2018 and successful. PRDF is monitoring the results. Another 5 companies under the leadership of PRDF applied in 2019 again to participate and share stand in SIAL Paris, the largest food sector. In 2020 5 companies from furniture industry signed agreement to participate in IMM Cologne in 2021.

PRDF role as the project Lead Partner is to support participants in organization and logistics, offer advisory and support directly during the trade fair.

Action itself is to offer complex support to enterprises which pointed out problems such as lack of experience in internationalization, lack of logistics knowledge while participating in trade fairs, and overcome bureaucracy connected with application for funds.

Stakeholders involved: Marshall’s Office of Podlaskie Voivodeship

The role of the entity, provided that financial resources are available, is to continue issuing calls for proposals for *Sub-measure 1.4.1 Promotion of entrepreneurship and increasing the investment attractiveness of the voivodship, type of project: fairs, missions and other international events*, in order to allow enterprises to apply for funds for investments in scope of internationalisation under the grant project.

Timeframe: 2018 -2020 (participation in trade fairs prolonged to 2021)

March 2018 – public consultation of proposed criteria (Monitoring Committee)

March 2018 1st call announced

March - April 2018 – PRDF prepares application for 10 regional enterprises

June 2018 – application funded (start of project implementation)

March 2019 – 2nd call announced

March 2019 – PRDF prepares application for 5 regional enterprises

June 2019 – application funded (start of project implementation)

March 2020 – 3rd call announced

March – April 2020 – PRDF prepares application for the group of regional enterprises

June – July 2020– results of the call announced (project implementation – depending on the chosen trade fair – until the end of 2021)

Indicative Costs: Allocation for each call is agreed independently and oscillates around 1 000 000 EUR, maximum amount per enterprise is 100 000 PLN of eligible cost (approx. 25 000 EUR).



Indicative funding sources: ERDF up to 85% (15% own contribution of micro and small enterprises, 25% own contribution of medium enterprises)

Monitoring: Progress and results will be monitored by Podlaska Regional Development Foundation together with the stakeholders involved in the recommendation's implementation (Marshal's Office of the Podlaskie Voivodship, Bialystok Science and Technology Park, Podlaski Equity Investment Fund Ltd.). The main result indicator to monitor is the number of SMEs receiving support (de minimis) and number of international agreements and letters of support. The project will be monitored on the daily basis via meetings, phone-calls. The project will be evaluated at the end of the implementation.

Action 2:

Relevance to the project:

“Foreign promotion plan 2014-2020 Region of Murcia” good practice presented by Murcia CEEIM in frames of FFWD project, described above in Action 1 background, due to its complexity, was an inspiration also for another recommended Action. All the analyses indicated, that enterprises also need tailor made services, going beyond organization of stand during trade fairs, but still being complementary with internationalization subject, such as: expertise, foreign market analyses, business models, law advisory regarding foreign market and contacts. GP presented in frames of implemented plan in Murcia region is focused on offering variety of services depending of maturity of the enterprise. Professional expertise which is elaborated on the demand of a single enterprises was also indicated in the presented good practice. At the same time stakeholders discussed the best solutions for complex supporting enterprises in Podlaskie region in the field on direct support for companies. ROP gave the opportunity to make use of specialized counselling services rendered by approved institutions, i.a. Podlaska Regional Development Foundation. The catalogue of services could be generally broad but including some services whose aim is to support SMEs in the internationalization process, e.g. drawing up an export strategy, selecting business partners abroad, market analyses, etc. Thanks to such services, entrepreneurs can become more prepared for entering a new market, which makes them more competitive, and which, above all, prevents them from financial losses.

Nature of the action:

It is recommended to apply to be enlisted as eligible and “certified” organization that offers a variety of services. Afterwards enterprises can apply for funding of these expertise tailor made services in frames of *Sub-measure 1.4.1 Promotion of entrepreneurship and increasing the investment attractiveness of the voivodship, Project type 1 A. Specialist consultancy services for Podlasie SMEs (demand model)*. Call for entities delivering services was announced at the beginning of 2019 based on the market demand analysis, which is pilot activity in frames of

ROP, and PRDF applied with below listed services focused on internationalization (list available https://rpo.wrotapodlasia.pl/pl/jak_skorzystac_z_programu/katalog-prorozwojowych-uslug-doradczych.html):

- New contractors acquiring
- Business strategy of foreign market entering
- Preparation for participation in foreign trade fair and exhibition events
- Analysis of formal and legal requirements for introducing the product / service to a foreign market
- Examination (audit) of the internalization potential of the enterprise
- Analysis of the foreign market target potential

First of all PRDF was assessed if it has potential to provide services, then each of the services was assessed separately. All submitted proposals got positive assessment and SMEs can apply for funds to get professional advisory since mid. 2019 until the end of 2020, with the possibility to implement services in 2021.

Stakeholders involved: Marshall’s Office of Podlaskie Voivodeship

The role of the entity, provided that financial resources are available, is to continue issuing calls for proposals for *Sub-measure 1.4.1 Promotion of entrepreneurship and increasing the investment attractiveness of the voivodship, Project type 1 A. Specialist consultancy services for Podlasie SMEs (demand model)*, in order to allow enterprises to apply for funds for investments in scope of internationalisation under the grant project. Marshall’s office is also institution “certifying” Business Development Organisations to offer highly professional services to SMEs in frames of the above mentioned sub-measure.

Timeframe: 2019 – 2020 (possibility of implementation in 2021)

March 2019 – call for Business Development Organisation to access their offer

May 2019 – call for SMEs to benefit from advisory services (continuous mode for each year)

December 2020 – closure of the call (implementation till the end of 2021)

Indicative Costs: SME can apply for up to 50 000 PLN (approx. 12 000 EUR) of eligible costs for each service with maximum 2 funded services totally. Each year Marshall’s Office plan to allocate approx. 1 100 000 EUR.

Indicative funding sources: ERDF up to 85% (15% own contribution of micro and small enterprises, 25% own contribution of medium enterprises)

Monitoring: Progress and results will be monitored by Podlaska Regional Development Foundation together with the stakeholders involved in the recommendation’s implementation (Marshall’s Office of the Podlaskie Voivodship, Bialystok Science and Technology Park, Podlaski Equity Investment Fund Ltd.). The main result indicator to monitor is the number of SMEs receiving support (de minimis) an achieved results depending on the services. The project will be monitored on the daily basis via meetings, phone-calls. The project will be evaluated at the end of the implementation. If the demand profiled services deriving from the market find out to be supportive the is high probability of including this pilot solution in the next funding scheme.



Additional action 3 : Mentoring program (*recommendation for ROP 2021-27 as a result of FFWD project*)

Relevance to the project:

Please describe how this action derives from the project and in particular from the interregional exchange of experience. Where does the inspiration for this action come from?

The inspiration comes directly from the Italian good practice “CCIATO – Mentoring for International Growth”. The Italian mentoring program aims to encourage the exchange of managerial experiences across international markets with business leaders, with personal or professional ties to Piedmont. It consists in a voluntary relationship between a business professional with significant and well-recognized work experience (Mentor) and an up-and-coming entrepreneur (Mentee). The Mentor, based in their own field of experience, facilitates the professional development of these mentees. Mentors are Italian professionals living abroad, with ties with Piedmont by origin, study or work. Mentors must have +10 years of proved experience in the field of management and business development. Mentees are company executives or key managers in a company based in Piedmont, interested in the international growth of the company.

Both parties engage in the relationship on a voluntary, non-paid basis and sign an agreement to adhere to certain ethical guidelines. The Mentoring lasts at least 8 months, with a minimum 30-hour-time commitment. The objective of the mentoring program is to improve the internationalization process of the companies in the Piedmont territory by sharing good practices and experiences. The project starts with a kick-off meeting, with mentors coming from around the world in Turin: it is the main event in which Mentors and potential Mentees get to know each other, so it is very important to achieve the best matching. Meeting the mentee in person is useful for the Mentor, due to the fact mentorship works better when the choice is made face-to-face.

Compared to the first edition, the number of mentors and mentees interested in the mentoring program has rapidly increased: the number of applicants went from 76 (1st edition) to 130 (3rd edition). In the last edition, 90% were satisfied with the Program. From their feedback, the achieved goals are: a new strategic plan to grow up in an international market, a new marketing and communication strategy, a new business plan, new internal company organization, development of international contacts and market areas.

This good practice was so interesting for the Marshal’s Office of Podlaskie Voivodship that its employees decided to participate in the project’s staff exchange in Turin where they had an opportunity to learn even more about the practice (19-22 March 2019). Therefore, the idea to implement a similar program in Podlaskie derives directly from interregional learning.

Upon the visit in Turin, the participants representing the Marshal's Office presented their observations and ideas: *“The mentoring program seems to be a good solution for Podlaskie. The location of the region next to the border and relatively low purchasing power of its inhabitants determine the necessity among SMEs to find new markets. The wave of emigration over years located thousands inhabitants of Podlaskie in different European and worldwide locations. These people are mostly active and represent entrepreneurial attitude, and most of them are now undoubtedly experienced experts in different domains and different foreign markets. On the other hand, the level of awareness of the opportunities of the development on foreign markets among SMEs in Podlaskie is insufficient. They lack time, knowledge and mainly support in this scope.”*

However, due to significant differences between the level of maturity of Polish and Italian market and their enterprises, as well as the level of development of specialized services for SMEs and the availability of mentors, there is no possibility to implement the Italian mentoring program directly. Nevertheless, it was agreed that the support of internationalization of regional companies based on the program “Mentoring for international growth”, upon required modification to the conditions and needs of the region of Podlaskie will be included as a proposal for the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodship 2021-2027 (as a new, pilot type of project).

Nature of the action:

Based on two good practices resulting from “Fast Forward Europe”, i.e. supporting internationalization of regional companies based on the model of the program “mentoring for international growth” and the program aiming at the establishment and development based on the initiative “Start up your own business” MIP, in the first version of the foundations of the ROP 2021-2027, the following type of project was proposed by the Marshal's Office:

“Mentoring, i.a.:

- 1) concerning the improvement of internationalization of the existing SMEs,
- 2) concerning the support for establishing start-ups”.

This type of the project was initially assigned to Policy Objective 1 Smarter Europe thanks to the support of innovative and smart economic transformation, including: specific objective (iii) Increasing the growth and competitiveness of SMEs (in compliance with the policy objectives specified in the draft of the general regulations for the perspective 2021-2027).

The content of the proposed draft of the Regional Operational Program will be subject to redrafting and modification in the course of program elaboration. Due to the early stage of document preparation for the next financial perspective and the template provided, the content of the program does not include detailed information about project types.

Nevertheless the ideas is to conduct pilot action in 2021. Similarly to the program taken as the good practice, regional mentoring program aims to encourage the exchange of managerial experiences across international markets with business leaders, with personal or professional ties to Podlaskie Voivodship. It will consists in a voluntary relationship between a business

professional with significant and well-recognized work experience (Mentor) and an up-and-coming entrepreneur (Mentee). The Mentor, based in their own field of experience, facilitates the professional development of these mentees. Mentors are professionals living either in the region, outside the region in Poland or abroad, with ties with Podlaskie Voivodeship by origin, study or work. Mentors must have minimum 5 years of proved experience in the field of management and business development. Mentees are company executives or key managers in a company based Podlaskie interested in the international growth of the company. Action will focus on start-ups and young enterprises.

Both parties engage in the relationship on a voluntary, non-paid basis and sign an agreement to adhere to certain ethical guidelines. The Mentoring should last at up to 8 months, with a minimum 30-hour-time commitment. The objective of the mentoring program is to improve the internationalization process of the companies in Podlaskie Voivodeship by sharing good practices and experiences. The project starts with a kick-off meeting connecting Mentors and Mentees. Meeting the mentee in person is useful for the Mentor, due to the fact mentorship works better when the choice is made face-to-face.

Expected goals are: a new strategic plan to grow up in an international market, a new marketing and communication strategy, a new business plan, new internal company organization, development of international contacts and market areas.

The scope of support offered by the new regional operational program for 2021-2027 will result not only from plans made by the Managing Authority, but also from the scope of intervention specified in the draft of the Partnership Agreement (made between the Polish government and the European Commission).

As it is all very general at the moment of submitting the action plan, Podlaska Regional Development Foundation will monitor further activities and report about their advancement.

Monitoring will be conducted in the form of meetings with stakeholders, where progress of presented subactions will be presented and discussed. Furthermore, some activities may be reported in e-mail correspondence. PRDF is also an official member of the Monitoring Committee of the Regional Operational Programme, and takes active part in its sittings. PRDF will also support Marshal's Office in the conduction of public consultations regarding the new ROP, including newly introduced mentoring program.

Stakeholders involved:

Marshal's Office of Podlaskie Voivodship – it is the body responsible for the current and new Regional Operational Program of Podlasie Voivodship. In the course of the implementation of the action plan, the institution will be responsible for presenting the idea of the mentoring program in the draft of the new program, negotiations of the program, and finally for its implementation (if applicable). From the perspective of the Marshal's Office it will be crucial to demarcate the support: national and regional level within Policy Objective 1 (which is



important for the possibility of including this type of project in the regional operational program).

Two other stakeholders – Bialystok Science and Technology Park and Podlaski Equity Investment Fund participated actively in the development of the action plan proposals. At a later stage, they are going to play a consulting role in the course of action plan implementation.

Timeframe:

Mentoring Programme for Podlaskie Voivodeship is expected to be implemented in 2021.

In order to introduce a mentoring program in the new regional operational program, the Marshal's Office of Podlaskie Voivodeship must submit the proposal of the new program to the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy and the European Commission. The pre-assumed timeframe is as follows:

1: Preparation of the foundations of the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodeship 2021-2027 – July 2019

2: Preparation of a draft of the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodeship 2021-2027

3: Public consultations

4: Preparation of the final version of the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodeship 2021-2027

5: Opinion of the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy on the conformity of the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodeship 2021-2027 and the Partnership Agreement

6: Sending the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodeship 2021-2027 to the European Commission; negotiations

7: Approval of the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodeship 2021-2027 (planned: December 2020)

8: Implementation of the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodeship 2021-2027 (planned: beginning of 2021)

Podlaska Regional Development Foundation is going to monitor work on the documentation together with FFWD stakeholders in order to provide implementation in 2021.

Timeframe for pilot edition of Mentoring Programme for Podlaskie Voivodeship is approximately as follows:

1. months 1-2 – set up of an action, organisation and logistics, recruitment of Mentors and Mentees
2. month 2-3 – Kick-off meeting gathering Mentors and Mentees, mentoring declarations/agreements signed, schedules of mentoring set-up
3. month 3-8 – individual mentoring
4. months - 9-10 closure

Indicative Costs:

The action connected with presenting the mentoring program as a proposal to the new ROP will be financed by the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodeship 2014-2020 – Technical Support; however, there is no specific allocation for this purpose yet. Cost will depend on the scale of the action.



Indicative funding sources:

The action connected with presenting the mentoring program as a proposal to the new ROP will be financed by the Regional Operational Program of Podlaskie Voivodship 2014-2020 – Technical Support.



Conclusions

Thanks to the participation in the project, the Marshal's Office of Podlaskie Voivodship learnt about the Spanish good practice, complex program for internationalization support. The stakeholder saw potential in such an activity; therefore, interregional learning was transformed into 2 particular actions in frames of Regional Operational Program for Podlaskie Voivodship in order to improve the regional policy, and finally to make the regional economy more competitive with the implication of internationalization. Number of regional enterprises already benefited from the undertaken actions due to the fact they were created in the market demand mode which in case of Podlaskie ROP, was tested as a pilot activity. Having learned from foreign partnership the responsible stakeholder – marshal's Office as well as Podlaska Regional Development Foundation could smoothly implement both actions, which will be monitored in assessed in the 2nd phase of FFWD implementation.

Besides FFWD created the added value with the inspiration to new financial perspective. The implementation of actions in the subject of mentoring program proposal will be observed by PRDF in the second phase of "Fast Forward Europe". The monitoring document will contain information about further agreements between the Marshal's Office, Ministry, and European Commission.

