

CRAFTS CODE Action Plan for

RAM Central Stara Planina (PP7)

Ministry of Innovation and Growth, European Funds for
Competitiveness Directorate General (PP9)

Inclusion of craft enterprises as a specific
sector in the Programme for Competitiveness
and Innovation in Enterprises 2021-2027 and
launching specific measure supporting family
businesses, creative industries and craft
enterprises.



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Part I – General information

Project	CRAFTS CODE – CReative Actions For Tailoring Smes' COmpetitive DEvelopment
Partner organisations	RAM Central Stara Planina (PP7) Ministry of Innovation and Growth, European Funds for Competitiveness Directorate General (PP9)
Other partner organisations involved (if relevant)	N/A
Country	Bulgaria
NUTS2 region	North Central region Southwest region
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Part II – Policy context

List of Policy Instruments

The cooperation in the project CRAFTS CODE was aimed at influencing the Operational Programme "Innovation and Competitiveness" 2014-2020 (OPIC) through changes in the management of the mentioned Operational Programme (OP). The objective of this type of intervention was "to help the body responsible for this policy instrument to improve the design of the OPIC thematic calls and to include measures for improving the SMEs competitiveness in the field of handicraft sector".

The targeted policy instrument in the Application form was OPIC 2014-2020. Given the situation in a global context with the COVID-19 pandemic and with a view of overcoming the negative effect from the state of emergency in the country and the economic consequences of the crisis, the Managing Authority (MA) of OPIC focused all its efforts, resources and capacity on launching simplified procedures for working capital under the Programme. The procedures were aimed at providing financial support for small and medium-sized enterprises affected by the restrictions, imposed in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering that the end of the current programming period is approaching and the lack of available financial resources (all resources have been already launched or planned), the MA does not envisage to launch procedures under OPIC, targeted specifically at the craft sector. However, craft enterprises registered under the Commerce Act or the Cooperatives Act were eligible for support under the procedures already launched. During the project implementation both Bulgarian project partners have identified that **the Programme "Competitiveness and innovation in enterprises" 2021-2027 (PCIE)**, which is the new name of the Program for new programming period 2021-2027 **is more suitable for a policy instrument.**

The PCIE is a Programme funded by European Structural and Investment Funds with co-financing from the national budget.

The Action Plan aims to impact (select 1):

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

**Name of the policy instrument addressed:
Programme "Competitiveness and Innovation in Enterprises" 2021-2027**



Programme “Competitiveness and Innovation in Enterprises” 2021–2027 (PCIE) is aimed at achieving smart and sustainable growth of the Bulgarian economy, as well as the implementation of industrial and digital transformation.

As an instrument for implementing the European Cohesion Policy for the period 2021-2027 and in particular of The European Regional Development Fund, PCIE 2021-2027 is intended to contribute to the achievement of the following Policy objectives set at European level:

(1) a more competitive and smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation and regional ICT connectivity;

(2) a greener, low-carbon transitioning towards a net zero carbon economy and resilient Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate change mitigation and adaptation, risk prevention and management, and sustainable urban mobility.

The planned support under PCIE 2021-2027 is aimed at overcoming the identified challenges and problems for the development of Bulgaria by addressing the relevant needs and requirements according to the objectives and priorities set out in the National Programme for development Bulgaria 2030; The innovation strategy for smart specialization for the period 2021-2027 (RIS3); The National Strategy for SMEs in Bulgaria 2021-2027 (NSSME), Digital Transformation of Bulgaria for the period 2020-2030 and other strategic documents at national level.

Addressing the needs identified in areas such as “competitiveness” and “entrepreneurship”, the PCIE responds through the interventions envisaged under Priority 1, specific objective 3 “Enhancing sustainable growth and competitiveness of SMEs and job creation in SMEs, including by productive investments”.

The target group according to this specific objective includes SMEs, branch / employer organizations, institutions, organizations and agencies supporting the business and improving the business environment.

One of the specific sectors outlined in the Measure 1.5 of NSSME 2021-2027 is the crafts sector. The envisaged support in NSSME includes projects and measures to promote crafts and entrepreneurs in the creative industries. Based on this and inspired by the Crafts Code project in the Action plan is proposed an action for supporting craft enterprises with production investments. Considering this, PCIE will include for the first time a specific procedure, thematically aimed at enterprises with a smaller scope of activities such as family businesses, enterprises from the creative industries and crafts.

This specific call is planned to be announced during the first half of 2023.

The PCIE is in its final stages of preparation prior to approval from the European Commission, which is expected by the end of this year at the latest. **The current draft of the PCIE**



includes a specific measure, focused on support for production investments in enterprises in accordance with the regional potential for development, incl. support for family businesses, creative industries and for crafts enterprises. This measure is under Specific objective (iii) „Enhancing sustainable growth and competitiveness of SMEs and job creation in SMEs, including by productive investment“ of Policy objective 1 of the current draft of the PCIE 2021-2027.

Responsible body for the policy instrument is the Managing Authority of PCIE – PP9 (Directorate-General for European Funds and Competitiveness of the Ministry of Innovation and Growth¹.

PP9 is Managing Authority of OPIC 2014-2020 and PCIE 2021-2027. The PP9 team is directly involved in the programming process of PCIE 2021-2027, thus using directly the information on the good practices of the other partner countries in the Crafts Code project partnership, which is an additional circumstance that allows proposing a new call ("New projects") under the PCIE, which also includes representatives of the craft sector as eligible beneficiaries.

As mentioned above, the objective according to the application form was "to help the body responsible for this policy instrument to improve the design of the OPIC thematic calls and to include measures for improving the SMEs competitiveness in the field of handicraft sector". Under the policy instrument, mentioned in the application form - OPIC, this was not possible, because of the limited implementing period and the lack of free resources. For this reason, PCIE is proposed for new policy instrument in order to realize the idea for new thematic call, including measures for improving the SMEs competitiveness in the field of handicraft sector.

Further details on the policy context and how the Action Plan contributes to it

RAM Central Stara Planina and the European Funds for Competitiveness Directorate General at the Ministry of Innovations and Growth², propose the inclusion in this Action Plan of a measure providing support to SMEs in the field of handicraft sector in order to increase their competitiveness. The Action Plan is developed under the CRAFTS CODE Project, funded by the Interreg Europe Programme.

² After the election of the new regular government of the Republic of Bulgaria in December 2021, structural changes were made in the composition of the Council of Ministers (CoM). By a Decision of the National Assembly of 13th of December 2021, the structure of the CoM was approved, according which the European Competitiveness Funds Directorate General (DG EFC) of the Ministry of Economy is transferred to the newly established Ministry of Innovation and Growth (MIG). With the entry into force of Decree № 20 of 25.02.2022 on the adoption of structural regulations of the Ministry of Economy and Industry and the Ministry of Innovation and Growth, the actual transition of DG EFC to the structure of MIG is a fact since 1st of March 2022.

Pursuant to § 12. (2) of the final provisions of the abovementioned Decree, all rights and obligations of GD EFC of the transformed Ministry of Economy are assumed by the MIG.



CRAFTS CODE Project was designed to achieve its goals via holding thematic meetings and seminars on the following topics:

- ✓ How to improve innovation applied to business model and process?
- ✓ How to access new markets and targets?
- ✓ How to renovate crafts sector by contamination with innovative approaches and tools?
- ✓ How to support crafts sector by access to finance?

The objective of the project was to help the body responsible for this policy instrument to improve the design of the OPIC thematic calls and to include measures for improving the SMEs competitiveness in the field of handicraft sector.

On the basis of exchange of experience and sharing of practices, the project partners had to gather ideas and integrate the lessons learnt from this cooperation into the actual Operational Programme with an additional view to post-2020 policy instruments. The international benchmark, tailored on crafts sector, would reinforce strategic policies and good practices had to be selected and transferred to impact on local environment. Cooperation with the Managing Authority (MA), partner of the project itself, ensures political and technical inputs to improve actions and impact on the OP.

The **targeted policy instrument** in the Application form was OPIC 2014-2020. The craft enterprises registered under the Commerce Act or the Cooperatives Act (for instance sole traders) were eligible for support under the procedures already launched under OPIC, but **no specific measure during the programming period 2014-2020, focusing on the craft sector was launched**, tailored to its needs. The current practices and launched measures show insufficient number of applications and respectively support for craft SME's under OPIC. Acknowledging the specifics of the craft enterprises regarding their scale and aims, their production capacity and turnover, these calls for proposals didn't suit well to their needs of support.

During the project implementation both Bulgarian project partners have identified that **the Programme "Competitiveness and Innovation in Enterprises" 2021-2027 (PCIE)**, which is the new name of the Programme for the new programming period 2021-2027, **is more suitable for a policy instrument.**

The main goal of the Action Plan and its implementation is to improve the design of the thematic call of the policy instrument in order to include measure (new projects) for improving the competitiveness specifically of SMEs in the field of the craft sector.

OPIC, respectively **PCIE**, as mentioned above, are **tools for the implementation of the National Strategy for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (NSSME), the Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization of the Republic of Bulgaria (RIS3) and some other related strategies.**



For the new programming period (2021-2027) the crafts was included as a priority sector in the NSSME. The measure aimed specifically at artisans "Support for crafts, entrepreneurship in rural areas and creative industries, incl. at the regional level" is included in the document after the need for a specific activities to support for crafts has been identified.

The crafts have also become part of the **RIS3** thematic area "New technologies in the creative and recreational industries" and are eligible for support under programs funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). This thematic area was chosen by the administrative districts of Lovech and Veliko Tarnovo (which are part of the territorial scope of PP7 - the RAM Central Stara Planina), and it is proposed that the projects of craft enterprises registered under the Commerce Act in these areas to have a competitive advantage and to receive "bonus points" at the stage of applying for all schemes to support innovation in enterprises of the new programs in 2021-2027 programming period.

Tourism is of great importance for the craftsmen in Bulgaria, because it is closely related to the offering of their products. The markets of the majority of craftsmen are regional and local. Following the economic stagnation, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, craft businesses are even more in need of support to survive and maintain their market position.

Bulgaria also has a Crafts Act, which aims to stimulate the development of crafts by providing appropriate conditions for entrepreneurship, protecting the interests of craftsmen and protecting consumers of craft services. Like the other SMEs the craft enterprises (mainly micro-enterprises) are facing a number of challenges: low level of innovativeness, difficult access to sources of funding and low investment activity, insufficient entrepreneurial activity, low level of internationalization and poor export structure. The conducted researches and analyzes show that now the craft enterprises in the country are characterized by a relatively low degree of innovation due to the nature of some of the crafts. Craft enterprises face significant difficulties in securing productive investments and need a small grant and / or micro-credit in order to invest in modern equipment, machinery and facilities. They often have difficulty developing business plans and entering new markets, and are skeptical about the use of digital technologies for online advertising and marketing, mainly due to lack of knowledge to promote and trade online (especially among the older generation of craftsmen). The research and SWOT analysis carried out within the project, the meetings and interviews with stakeholders show the following with regard to craft enterprises: lack of current market analyzes and research and consequent lack of an action plan for expanding the markets of craft enterprises, hampered work of craftsmen, reduced consumption and narrowed opportunities for traditional sales of handicraft products as a result of the measures imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of information on the marketing and technological innovation opportunities applicable to craft enterprises in the region, aging of experienced and highly skilled craftsmen, rapidly changing global environment and need for flexibility and rapid adaptation to respond to competitive pressure and maintaining market positions, strong competition from imitation products, mass production at lower prices, imposed by aggressive advertising and marketing strategies.



Part III – Details of the actions envisaged

ACTION 1

Inclusion of craft enterprises as a specific sector in the Programme for Competitiveness and Innovation in Enterprises for the period 2021-2027 and launching specific measure supporting family businesses, creative industries and craft enterprises.

1. Action description

The main goal of the proposed action in the Action Plan and its implementation is to improve the design of the call of the new policy instrument (PCIE) compared to the initially proposed instrument (OPIC) and to include thematic call with a specific tailored measures (new projects) for improving the competitiveness of the SMEs in the craft sector. The call is planned to support family businesses, creative industries and craft enterprises by production investments. The goal of production investments is to increase competitiveness and create conditions for growth in the supported enterprises.

The proposed Action shall provide access to co-financing (small grants) for productive investments in modern equipment, machinery and facilities for strengthening craft SMEs competitiveness. It should be tailored to the needs of the family enterprises, creative industries, including craft enterprises and these specifics, along with the regional development potential should be taken into account in the selection criteria.

This action will complement the other measures for SMEs for the next programming period - 2021-2027, planned under Specific objective (iii) „Enhancing sustainable growth and competitiveness of SMEs and job creation in SMEs, including by productive investment“ under PCIE. Craft enterprises could receive support for purchase of new modern equipment and become more competitive. Indirectly, craft businesses could also benefit from an improved access to markets. Under the same specific objective craft enterprises could also avail of one-stop shops through consultations, training, information, participation in forums, exhibitions and other trade events.

Economic Policy Directorate of the Ministry of Economy and Industry (MEI)³ is responsible for the development of the Strategy for the Promotion of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises and as of March 1st 2022 the Ministry of Innovation and Growth is responsible for the development and implementation of the Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization. The Bulgarian Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion Agency (BSMEPA) is one of the institutions responsible for the implementation of the NSPSME. Both strategies have crucial importance for the support of

³ Previous Ministry of Economy



crafts in the new programming period (2021-2027). During Phase 1 of the implementation of the project, having in mind the leading role of both institutions (MEI and BSMEPA), a letter was prepared, inviting their representatives to participate in the stakeholder group under the Crafts Code project. As a result, two representatives of the Economic Policy Directorate joined the 4th Stakeholders Group Meeting (SGM). BSMEPA contributed within its competences by providing useful information on the topic of SWOT analysis.

The experts responsible for programming of PCIE 2021-2027 are part of the team of PP9 as well. Our participation in Crafts Code project gave us additional and useful information about the craft sector, as well as motivation and ideas for inclusion of specific, tailored measure in the new Programme.

The inclusion of crafts in the priorities of the National Strategy for the SMEs is another proof of the importance and significance of the implementation of such a measure. Added value will be the fact that it will be tailored to the specifics of the sector, the latest trends in this sector worldwide and the good practices of other project partners.

The efforts of all interested organizations to include crafts as a priority in the National Strategy for the SMEs show how important this action is for the Bulgarian craft enterprises.

Providing access to funding of larger number of craft SMEs will contribute to their survival and improve their competitiveness. This will be a significant opportunity to develop measure to support SMEs in the period 2021-2027 and to improve the identified Policy Instrument.

2. The background

Description of the lessons learnt from the project that constitute the basis for the development of the present Action Plan.

The specific needs of Bulgarian craft enterprises are described in general in the previous sections. Bulgarian craftsmen are bearers of traditions that must be supported and preserved. Given their specificity - their small scale of activity (mainly micro and small enterprises), mainly manual activity, they are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the crisis caused by COVID-19.

During Phase 1 of the project implementation, we sought for ideas and lessons from our partners on how to overcome problems and effectively and efficiently support craft enterprises in Bulgaria.

During the implementation of the first phase of the project, the Bulgarian partners took part in 4 interregional thematic seminars and held 9 meetings with the group of local stakeholders. The four interregional thematic seminars were dedicated to the following topics:

- ❖ How to improve innovation applied to business model and process?
- ❖ How to access new markets and targets?



- ❖ How to renovate crafts sector by contamination with innovative approaches and tools?
- ❖ How to support crafts sector by access to finance?

During all thematic events many good practices, mentioned below, were shared. Their application could be useful for strengthening and development of the craft sector in Bulgaria.

Particularly useful in view of the goals of the Bulgarian partners for optimal structuring of the future thematic call, including measures to support and improve the competitiveness of craft sector, were the best practices and **the overall policy to support businesses in the craft sector of Ireland, Italy and Spain**. The overall experience of Ireland shared during the Matchmaking session and the additional information provided by the Irish experts, the online sources, provided by our Italian colleagues were useful and provoked further research in the area of the support for craft enterprises.

The *1st Interregional Thematic Seminar (ITS)*, with presentation of good practices from partners regions was held online in May 2020. This ITS confirmed that digitalization, innovation and mentorship will be crucial to address the uncertainty of the COVID recovery period and after this ITS we started to think how to support craft SMEs with a specific targeted measure. Although the measure foreseen in Action 1 is not focused directly on digitalization, the good practices presented during the ITS convinced us that we should think about tailored measure in order to respond to the specific needs of the Bulgarian craftsmen.

The *2nd Interregional Thematic Seminar* was focused on the topic how to access new markets and targets. The presentation on "Socio-economic post-COVID-19 scenario for future trends in Europe, focused on consumer goods"⁴ of the consulting agency "Abay Analistas" led us to think about the prospects, facing Bulgarian craft enterprises after the COVID-19 era. The presenter explained the main challenges the craft enterprises will face in the new economic reality and the factors of change that need to be anticipated. He focused on those factors that affect the craft sector, such as the rapid technological change, the increase in innovation, energy transition, the protectionism and changes in social values and habits, uncertainty about the evolution of the pandemic and/or the appearance of new crisis, etc. One of the important points for us was the information about the asymmetric impact over different sectors. This presentation led us to think about the long lasting and structural effects of the pandemic and **the need for tailored support for the craft enterprises** for their faster recovery from the effects of the economic crisis following the pandemic and/or adapting of the enterprises to work under new business environment.

During the *3rd Interregional Thematic Seminar*, we found some important regional Good Practices. Interesting and useful for us in view of the specifics of our policy instrument were the good practices "Innovation Vouchers" of Design & Crafts Council Ireland and Hungarian Needlecrafts Academy. The first initiative aims to build links between public knowledge providers and small businesses, and the second reminded us of the **need for specialized but**

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swbW7aB-BCE>



comprehensive support for artisans, which includes skills development, **access to finance** and internationalization assistance.

The 4th *Interregional Thematic Seminar* gave us knowledge about the importance of **tailored financial support** for the handicraft sector. We found very useful practices for us among the presented.

PRACTICE from Ireland: **Hard Cash and Soft Supports - Building Resilient Businesses**

The Local Enterprise Office (LEO) provides accessible financial supports for businesses in each local authority in Ireland. Their **priming and business expansion grants** can offer grant aid of up to €150,000.

PRACTICE from Italy: **Artistic Crafts Call for Proposals**

“Rinascimento Firenze” gives oxygen to the numerous projects that were thriving prior to the pandemic, but are now suffering. OMA, as the implementing body, is disbursing 1 million euro in **non-repayable grants** and Intesa Sanpaolo is making impact **loans** from 60 to 500 thousand euro available for each individual subject chosen, for a total of 5 million euro. The first call for proposals is **open to micro and small enterprises within the artistic crafts sector**, based in the Metropolitan City of Florence. This includes **artisan businesses** and workshops, also organized in the form of nonprofit organizations (such as social enterprises and cooperatives), which stand out for the high quality of their products and materials, for their non-standardized production processes, and for the use of traditional techniques, but also for the **introduction of innovative technologies** that represent the productions and activities historically identifying the territory.

PRACTICE from Spain: **Aids for the Spanish crafts sector**

Most of the regions of Spain developed **their own specific measures to support the sector**. In Catalonia two **programs** were designed, one of which to **reactivate the economy of crafts companies**.

In order to achieve our goal to adequately support the craft sector in Bulgaria and to comply with national specifics in its development, **we decided to “borrow ideas” from several good practices of project partners by applying the most appropriate elements from each one of them**.

For the measure we propose to be implemented we will consider the factors presented in the analysis “Socio-economic post-COVID-19 scenario for future trends in Europe, focused on consumer goods” during the 2nd Interregional Thematic Seminar.

The practices presented during the ITSs were discussed with our stakeholders. They were the basis for discussion of the action that is most relevant to be included in the Action plan and to improve the Policy instrument.



Based on the findings of these activities RAM Central Stara Planina and the Ministry of Innovation and Growth, European Funds for Competitiveness Directorate General, has prepared this Action plan aimed at **increasing the competitiveness of craft enterprises in Bulgaria by launching specific call for projects to support family businesses, creative industries and craft enterprises by production investments.**

Based on the above mentioned PP7 and PP9 decided to propose a measure (new thematic call) to support family businesses, creative industries and craft enterprises by production investments, which includes the following ideas from other partners:

- Inspired by the presentation of the consulting agency “Abay Analistas” we decided to plan and offer the realization of specific measure by production investments, tailored to the needs of craft enterprises in Bulgaria, which will support them to become more competitive in the post COVID period. The measure will consider the new business reality, the asymmetric impact of the crisis over different sectors, etc. The support for the craft enterprises will help for their faster recovery from the effects of the economic crisis following the pandemic and/or adapting of the enterprises to work under new business environment.

- Inspired from the Good practices already mentioned above from Spain, Italy and Ireland we decided to propose the following parameters:
 - The call will be for SMEs within the creative industries, crafts sector and family business;
 - The support will be in the form of co-financing (small grants);
 - The support will be through productive investments in modern equipment, machinery and facilities;
 - The application should be digital.

The information and the new knowledge gained from the team during the realization of the Crafts Code project will be valuable for drafting a measure for productive investments in craft enterprises according to the regional potential for development. The parameters of the measure will be further consulted with the members of the LSG, craft entrepreneurs, the Monitoring Committee of PCIE, and all interested parties during a public discussion.



3. Activities and timing

Number	Brief description of activity	Envisaged Indicative Timing ⁵
1	Official submission of the PCIE to the EC	Q2 of 2022
2	If the PCIE is approved and the proposed measure is accepted: Elaboration of Methodology and Criteria for selection of operations	Q2 of 2022
2.1.	Consultation with the interested parties	Q3 of 2022
2.2.	Public discussion	Q3 of 2022
2.3.	Approval of the Methodology and Criteria for selection of operations from the Monitoring Committee of the PCIE 2021 – 2027	Q3 of 2022
3	Elaboration of application guidelines	Q3 of 2022
4	Launch of the grant award procedure	Q1 of 2023
5	Monitoring of results from the call ⁶	Q4 of 2024

⁵ The indicative timing depends on external factors such as the finalization of the institutional structuring of the new ministries, the approval of the PCIE from the European Commission, the constitution of the new Monitoring Committee of PCIE, etc.

⁶ The monitoring of the financed projects will not be possible in the timeframe of the Crafts Code project.



4. Players involved

Responsible body for the policy instrument: Directorate-General for European Funds and Competitiveness of the Ministry of Innovation and Growth - Managing Authority of OPIC and PCIE, PP9

The PP7 and the LSG will continue to participate in the preparation of the measure and will be directly involved in the process of Policy instrument improvement through participation in the consultation process under the Programme. Currently the new Programme "Competitiveness and Innovation in Enterprises" 2021–2027 has been drafted and is in final phase prior to approval from the EC.

The following organizations have been identified within the project as stakeholders relevant and able to influence the operational program at national level:

- ❖ Ministry of Economy and Industry, Economic Policy Directorate;
- ❖ The Executive Agency for Promotion of Small and Medium Enterprises (BSMEPA);
- ❖ Chambers of Commerce and Industry;
- ❖ Business and Professional Associations;
- ❖ Other members of the Monitoring Committee of OPIC 2014-2020, Thematic Working Group for the development of PCIE and future Monitoring Committee of PCIE 2021-2027;
- ❖ Other organizations related to relevant policies.

The stakeholder group in Phase1 of the project took an active part in the policy study process, through participation in the meetings and partially in seminars.

The main role of stakeholders was to consult the process of drafting an Action Plan to improve the operational program, as a tool for implementing policies to encourage craft enterprises.

5. Costs and funding

The funding for the beneficiaries (craft enterprises, family enterprises and creative industries) will be up to 50 000 000 EUR.

Funding source - Program "Competitiveness and Innovation in Enterprises" 2021–2027

ERDF funding



6. Monitoring and indicators

- ❖ A thematic call for proposals launched
- ❖ Financial resources provided

