

Recurrent Evaluation of the Achievement of OPTA Goals for the Period 2021 - 2027

Executive Summary

October 2024



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Assignment, definition and context of the evaluation

The evaluation report focuses on the Technical Assistance Operational Programme (OPTA) for the period 2021–2027, which is key to ensuring the successful implementation of EU funds in the Czech Republic. The program pursues several goals, including increasing the expertise of workers involved in the implementation of funds, improving administrative capacities and optimizing methodological processes.

The programme is implemented by two priority axes. The first axis (Priority1) is aimed at supporting the implementation of EU funds at the central level, while the second axis (Priority2) supports regional partners. During the implementation of the programme, five calls have been opened so far, four of them in P1 and one in P2. A total of 273 projects were supported, of which 210 are already being implemented or have been completed, in a total amount of approx. 3,365 million. CZK (eligible expenses of approved projects). Projects are implemented by 207 entities (projects in progress), of which 200 are in PO2.

The evaluation of the OPTA takes place regularly once a year and provides feedback to the OPTA Managing authority and the European Commission. It focuses on eight evaluation areas, which include staff training, administrative capacity and the effectiveness of implementation processes. The goal of the evaluation is to monitor the progress of the programme, identify obstacles and propose measures to eliminate them in order to ensure the effective implementation of programme goals. The first interim report also set the baselines: a key objective is to ensure replication of data collection each year to assess changes and trends in OPTA implementation.

The evaluation consists of eight thematic areas, defined in the procurement documentation and elaborated in the Entry Report:

- Education
- Setting up OPTA processes / methodological framework
- Administrative capacity of implementation supported from OPTA
- Administrative costs of implementation - personal costs
- Personal cost - satisfaction
- Information and monitoring system
- Support of the Digital Information Agency and the Ministry of the Interior
- Institutional trust

The training of employees of the information structure of EU funds has sufficient capacity and covers mostly relevant topics, but approximately one third of the employees do not participate in the training for various reasons.

In the field of education, the staff of the implementation structure mostly have **sufficient information about available education** and this education shows **sufficient capacity**. However, approximately one third of the employees of the implementation structure **do not participate in training**.

According to the data, the reason is neither insufficient information nor lack of educational capacity. Interest in educational courses is regularly monitored and the offer is adapted to this demand. The primary reason for the non-participation of some employees in training is their perception that **the offer does not meet their needs**. **Time reasons** are also important. Part of the respondents, mainly from the regions, also mention **the necessity of traveling as a reason for not participating** - and would welcome the possibility of a hybrid form of education.



Are the goals of the OPTA - financed education system met?



What are the main difficulties in the administration of educational courses?

The coordinator of the education system perceives the demand for new topics and tries to respond to it. A key barrier to expanding the education system to include new topics is **the lack of suitable lecturers**. This deficiency can be seen in the reluctance of managers

to release key employees as education lecturers and in the lack of motivation of experienced employees of the implementation structure due to **low financial reward**. One of the reasons for the low financial reward to lecturers is the competition of applicants/suppliers (to win the public procurement) by lowering their lecturers' costs ("race-to-the-bottom").



implemented.

The proposed recommendations in the field of education focus primarily on the issue of the availability of hybrid and online courses, increasing the motivation for education among employees and managers, as well as on the conditions of public procurement through which the Education System is

Methodological support and communication with MA staff is at a good level, more attention can be paid to clarifying and communicating changes in the management documentation.

A high degree of satisfaction with methodological support and communication with MA staff is observed. Nevertheless, specific difficulties are identified that limit the effective implementation of OPTA. Among the most important are **the scope and fragmentation of rules** and procedures among a number of sub-documents and annexes of management/methodological documentation, general and insufficiently specific language, **differences in the requirements of operational programmes**, which complicate or they increase the administrative burden if the applicant draws support from multiple programmes, and last but not least, the fact that **methodological documents are written generally for all types of projects and beneficiaries**, they are not targeted.



To what extent does OPTA management documentation create an effective framework for implementation?

In relation to **updates and amendments to the rules** for recipients, or requirements of the MA, apart from the frequency of these modifications, the object of criticism is mainly **the low clarity of updates** (the form of processing updates and modifications): specific changes and their effects are not apparent from the updated versions of management documentation at first glance, and also **the lack of information about the updates**.

The implementation of the support itself is rather **less time-consuming** than in the case of other operational programmes, and the requirements of the management documentation **do not create an unreasonable administrative burden**. Therefore, the recommendations are mostly aimed at making this framework more transparent, rather than at modifying processes in the sense of reducing the administrative burden.



How effectively is the communication set up between the MA and the beneficiaries regarding the setting of the rules for the beneficiaries and the requirements of the MA?

The feedback in relation to the communication between the MA and the beneficiaries is **very positive**. **The stability of the structure on the MA's side** and the fact that the beneficiary has **only one project manager with whom everything communicates is highly appreciated**. **The responsiveness of communication** by the MA and its **transparency** are highly rated.



Recommendations focus on the form and communication regarding updates of key documents and also suggest specific options for making work with methodologies easier and clearer, especially for less experienced project managers.

The administrative capacity meets the requirements of the implementation, mainly thanks to the introduction of flat rates, which are a significant benefit. At the same time, however, the low percentage of the flat rates causes complications for many recipients

The administrative capacity on the part of the beneficiaries and the MA corresponds to the administrative requirements of OPTA implementation. The fundamental contribution is mainly the introduction of flat rates and the limitation of obligations regarding the reporting of monitoring indicators. It is also beneficial to relax the rules for submitting ŽOP and reports on the implementation of one's projects, but a possible extension of the



Does the administrative capacity of the beneficiaries and the OPTA MA correspond to the administrative requirements of the implementation?

monitored period up to 6 months would be considered beneficial by many beneficiaries and employees of the implementation structure.



What are the sources of possible administrative complexity of OPTA implementation?

One of the fundamental sources of excessive administrative burden on beneficiaries is the short life cycle of projects, or the need to submit new and largely identical projects every two years.

Fluctuation

The rate of fluctuation of employees of the implementation structure financed by OPTA and regional partners does not show fundamental deviations from the sustainable rate of fluctuation. Above



During the monitored period, how did the turnover of employees at regional partners develop compared to employees of central state administration bodies?

all, however, the employees of the regional partners perceive an intense risk of destabilization due to the "frozen" limits on wages, which they are to remain unchanged throughout the implementation period. This fact, in addition to the risk of personnel instability and increased turnover, indirectly also leads to the limitation of the strategic development of human resources at regional partners due to the limitation of education expenses and the fragmentation of the employees' agenda between several mutually unrelated projects so that it is possible to use higher limits in other programmes.

Flat rates



What impact does the introduction of the financing of administrative costs in the form of a flat rate have on the administrative capacities of the MA and beneficiaries?

In relation to the introduction of flat rates, the feedback is very positive, especially from regional partners. In the case of larger institutions, it is observed by some of its representatives that rather than reducing the administrative burden, the introduction of lump sums led to the transfer of this burden to other employees (who are often not directly involved in the implementation of OP TA). However, the causes of this problem are on the side of the internal regulations and

processes of these institutions, not on the OPTA side - so they cannot be solved by the program. Despite the very positive feedback, some limits of flat-rate were noted, which may have a negative effect on the implementation of OP TA. The biggest complaint is the low amount of flat-rate fees (20%), which is considered insufficient mainly by MAS offices. Flat rates of OP TA are lower than other programmes, which leads to a reduction in educational expenses and other ancillary costs. Limits on personal expenses (CZK 45,000) are also considered too low and prevent the recruitment of qualified employees.

Flat rates also partially complicate the financial management of projects – due to the fluctuation of beneficiaries' wage costs, there is uncertainty in the availability of funds from flat rates. In addition, transfer of the lump sums not spent in the given year to the following period causes complications, especially for the state administration (state budget rules).

Despite the partial criticisms mentioned above, the vast majority of participants find flat rates to be beneficial, as they significantly reduced the administrative burden associated with programme implementation.



Recommendations in the area of administrative capacity and administrative requirements of implementation elaborate mainly on the key bottlenecks that have been identified:

- allowed project implementation time,
- the length of reporting periods,
- the amount of lump sums and salary limits.

There is a significant difference in the average personnel costs between horizontal institutions and other beneficiaries



What is the structure and amount of personal costs for beneficiaries financed by OPTA?

Significant difference in the (average) amount of personal costs between horizontal institutions and other beneficiaries was identified. This is mainly caused by the set **limits for Calls for proposals no. 3 and 4**. It is clear that the average values of personnel costs **in these calls are close to the set limits** and the

differences between the individual types of institutions supported under Call 3 are very small. In the case of "second generation" MAS projects, a slight increase in the average salary for recalculated hours (target values of the indicator) can be observed, but due to the existence of a maximum limit, the scope for increasing remuneration is minimal.

Dissatisfaction with financial evaluation prevails among respondents

Overall, dissatisfaction with the financial evaluation prevails among the respondents. However, significant differences can be noted between individual institutions. Employees of **RPC secretariats and CLLD offices** show **the lowest level of satisfaction with wages**, but employees of the Ministry of Finance are only slightly more satisfied. On the contrary, the highest satisfaction with wages was recorded in the case of representatives of



What are the differences in satisfaction with the salaries of OPTA-funded employees between different beneficiaries?

ITI holders. A key source of dissatisfaction, especially in the case of regional partners (especially CLLD), is **the low salary limits in OPTA projects** – these are significantly lower than in projects of other programmes, from which the operation of MAS offices is also financed. Dissatisfaction with financial evaluation produces **an increased risk of turnover**.



What kind are there reasons for possible reduced satisfaction with remuneration?

The majority of internal and external users of the information and monitoring system are rather satisfied with the user-friendliness, but a significant number of users formulate a number of complaints.



What is the perception of the user-friendliness of CSSF21+ and ISKP21+, and the usefulness of selected functionalities among IS users?

Most internal users are **rather satisfied with the MS2021+ monitoring system**. Approximately two-fifths of the respondents consider working in the system to be **intuitive and tend not to get into situations where they do not know how to proceed further**, a slight

majority of users also give **rather positive feedback** regarding manuals, e-trainings and other tools that are supposed to facilitate their work in system. However, only a slight majority of respondents are familiar with e-learning options (those who are familiar generally find e-learning beneficial)

Despite the slightly positive evaluation, a large number of users formulate **specific complaints against the monitoring system**. Most of these criticisms are rather of a general nature (clarification, acceleration, the necessity of too many "clicks" for a partial action, etc.) or they address specific technical difficulties - uploading attachments, system speed, difficulties with logging in, etc. A frequent request is the ability to have multiple tabs/windows open on one screen, and a number of users in their open responses address, just like ISKP21+ users (below), **the separation of the public procurement module from the project module**, which, in their opinion, is not intuitive and significantly **complicates work with the system**.

Even in the case of (external) users of the ISKP21+ system, **slightly positive or neutral feedback prevails in most questions**. There is a slight preponderance of respondents who consider the system to be (**rather user friendly** (however, these are more experienced users who, according to their own words, have already gotten used to the system) and state that they usually do not need to read the manual even when performing a new operation in the system. Only **a minority of users** also reported that **they get into situations when working in the system where they do not know how to proceed further**.

Even among external users, **a number of comments were made about the user-friendliness** and the functioning of the system in general. In addition to rather technical criticisms, for example, requirements for **better connection with other state administration systems** can be identified, and specifically, a number of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with **the new solution of the public procurement module** - similarly to the case of internal CSSF users.

The awareness of available technical support through the Technical Hotline and other user support tools is rather lower, the majority of respondents do not even know about the existence of instructional videos (however, those who know about their existence and have used them consider them useful in the vast majority).

In relation to the change in the method of logging into the ISKP21+ system, the majority of respondents stated that **they did not have a fundamental problem with this change**. However, part of the respondents noticed technical problems during the transition to the new system of logging in via Citizen Identity, and a significant proportion of users (14%) are very dissatisfied with the change. In addition to technical problems and a more complicated login mechanism, the reason for dissatisfaction is also the general **disapproval of the use of personal data** for login.



The recommendations in this section focus primarily on raising awareness of technical support options, strengthening e-learning and better linking project modules and public contracts.

Support of the Digital Information Agency and the Ministry of the Interior

In the case of the evaluation of the support of the teams of the DIA and the Ministry of the Interior, **problems were noted mainly in the initial phase associated with the need to divide the former one project into two** - after the creation of the DIA. After

solving this problem, however, **the administration of the projects** from which the teams at MV and DIA are supported is **problem-free and does not generate an excessive workload**. A key barrier to the performance of the activities defined in both projects are **deficits in the administrative capacity of both institutions**. This is especially evident at the DIA, which is a new institution and is still stabilizing its personnel. However, **low limits on wage expenses** are also a significant limitation. It is therefore necessary to finance salaries from other sources, which represents a significant administrative burden beyond the normal administration of support from OP TA.



Mol team effective?

To what extent is the support for the horizontal implementation of e-Government, i.e. the support of the Digital Information Agency and the

Regional partners highly value trust in relation to the MA and other partners in the territory



How does institutional trust develop over time between OPTA beneficiaries at the regional level, the MA and relevant stakeholders?

The feedback from representatives of regional partners regarding **institutional trust is very positive, especially in relation to MA OPTA**. More than 91% of respondents perceive cooperation with the MA as a partnership, and **communication is described as transparent and helpful**, while the stability and long-term cooperation with the project manager increases trust. The proportion of respondents who **feel like partners also for other institutions of the region**. The most positive evaluations came from MAS offices and ITI holders, while representatives of RSK secretariats evaluate these relations slightly more negatively. Trust is influenced by **informal relationships and**

The feedback from representatives of regional partners regarding **institutional trust is very positive, especially in relation to MA OPTA**. More than 91% of respondents perceive cooperation with the MA as a partnership, and **communication is described as**

personal contacts between regional partners and key stakeholders. Staff stability and MAS's long-term presence in the region contribute positively to trust.

Evaluation methodology

The main method of data collection was a questionnaire survey. This took place in two phases – a pilot survey took place in February and March 2023, followed by a full survey from April to May 2024. The questionnaires were created after consultations with key stakeholders (including an evaluation of the pilot collection) and were divided into 11 thematic areas that reflected different areas, on which the evaluation is focused - education, methodological framework, wages, information and monitoring systems or trust in institutions, etc. Each questionnaire was adapted to a specific target group. In total, seven of these target groups were defined, namely recipients of support, project implementers, external and internal users of the information system, beneficiaries of support from OPTA, subject matter experts and the e-government team. A total of 972 responses were obtained, which provided a quantitative basis for evaluating the implementation of the programme in areas such as education, methodological framework, administration and e-government.

In addition to the questionnaire survey, four other evaluation methods were used to provide deeper insight and context:

1. **Content analysis** was focused on relevant documents related to OPTA implementation, such as annual reports, programme documents and methodological guidelines. The goal was to evaluate the effectiveness of the processes and procedures associated with the programme, but these resources were also invaluable, for example, when analyzing the topic of education.
2. **The statistical analysis of the secondary data** used data from the MS21+ system, which included data on the use of funds, project monitoring and progress in meeting objectives. This data enabled a quantitative analysis of the effectiveness of programme implementation. Furthermore, as part of the analysis, ad-hoc data reports, provided by the responsible bodies of the MMR, were processed, which mainly dealt with the topics of education and administrative capacity.
3. **In-depth interviews** were conducted with key actors, such as representatives of regional partners and horizontal institutions, to provide qualitative insight into the issues identified in the questionnaire surveys. The interviews contributed to a deeper understanding of all topics covered by the evaluation. A total of 14 interviews were conducted for the preparation of the Interim Report (additional interviews were conducted in the preparatory phase of the evaluation), part of which took the form of a group interview.
4. **The focus groups** focused on two key themes: simplified expense reporting and administrative burden. Discussions in the groups made it possible to identify shared experiences and specific problems among different groups of participants.

In conclusion, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods provided a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness and implementation of OPTA, with the main emphasis on questionnaire surveys, complemented by other methods for deeper analysis and context.