



Call for external State aid experts
to support the assessment of project proposals
submitted to the Interreg South Baltic Programme
in the funding period 2021-2027

1. Background

The Interreg V-A Poland-Denmark-Germany-Lithuania-Sweden Programme (Interreg South Baltic Programme 2021-2027) has been established based on Regulation (EU) No. 2021/1058, Regulation (EU) No. 2021/1059 and Regulation (EU) No. 2021/1060. The strategic Programme document, called Cooperation Programme (CP), has been approved by the European Commission on 4 October 2022.

The Interreg South Baltic Programme 2021-2027 enters a new era of multilateral cross-border cooperation between the coastal regions of five EU Member States: Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Lithuania, and Poland. For the Programming period of 2021-2027 the Programme sets a vision of its development direction as *“United by the sea into action for blue and green future – Innovative, Sustainable, Attractive and Active South Baltic”*. The total European Regional Development Funding (ERDF) allocated to the Programme for the period 2021-2027 is EUR 79 916 558,00.

The Programme should, hence, play a considerable role in strengthening the development efforts of the involved regions, while contributing to an integrated development of the entire Programme area by supporting cross-border cooperation projects with mutual benefit, tangible outputs and concrete results.

Four Programme Priorities and seven Programme Measures (PM) were defined by the Interreg South Baltic Programme 2021-2027 to be addressed within the cross-border cooperation:

PRIORITY 1 - Innovative South Baltic

- **Programme Measure 1.1 Digitalising the region**

The project activities should propose innovative approaches including digitalisation of public services and increasing the level of digitalisation of different sectors to integrate services and strengthen connectivity within the South Baltic area. It is expected that proposals will support development of digital skills and boost the development especially of sectors related to the blue and green economy.

- **Programme Measure 1.2 Building connectivity of the region through internationalization**

The Project proposals are expected to enhance the SMEs competitiveness, innovativeness, and their presence on an international market: expansion of SMEs

stands in need of efficient cross-border learning and networking platforms, business advisory services and matchmaking actions to assist them in moving from domestic to international business practices.

PRIORITY 2 - Sustainable South Baltic

- **Programme Measure 2.1 Supporting transition towards green energy**

The cross-border projects are anticipated to be aimed at raising awareness of the need for developing solutions to improve the production and use of renewable energy, which can further help implementing the energy transitions. Solutions may include complementary actions focusing on developing and adapting systems of energy storage and distribution in order to ensure the safe and efficient use of renewable energy.

- **Programme Measure 2.2 Promoting sustainable use of water**

The Baltic Sea and its tributaries suffer from a high level of pollution (e.g., plastics and chemicals) and eutrophication. Actions planned in project proposals should aim at broadening support of efficient and sustainable water management, especially in the field of reducing the outlets of nutrients and hazardous substances into river-basins, and subsequently the Baltic Sea to enhance the water quality.

- **Programme Measure 2.3 Supporting a circular and more resource efficient development**

There is a visible potential for cross-border projects aimed at promotion and implementation of circular economy related actions connected to reuse and recycling, circular product development and design, new resource efficient products and services, water efficiency methods for industry and public sector etc. Proposals of the new solutions for the areas of mobility, employment, healthcare and social security systems, use of natural (non-renewable) resources, business sectors etc are expected from the project partners.

PRIORITY 3 - Attractive South Baltic

- **Programme Measure 3.1 Developing sustainable, resilient, and innovative tourism**

Project proposals are anticipated to address sustainable tourism development: the actions should focus on the improvement of the tourist and cultural offers and creation of new ones forming new and innovative services and products; reduction of the negative impact of travel and tourism on the natural environment; sustainable use

of resources such as energy; mitigation of tourism seasonality and transition towards sustainable, all-year-round tourism.

PRIORITY 4 - Active South Baltic

- **Programme Measure 4.1 Strengthen the cooperation capacity of actors based within the South Baltic Area (including civil society)**

To solve common cross-border problems and build mutual reliance in the areas of administration, regional development and cross-border mobility projects are proposed to include a wide group of actors, especially local actors, to cooperate, create ample opportunity for networking, exchange experience and build cooperation capacities under implementation of a joint project.

2. General procedure for the assessment of project proposals

The Joint Secretariat (JS) is responsible to the Monitoring Committee (the Programme's decision-making body selecting projects for funding) for the assessment of project applications. As the Programme's general rule, each application, in addition to the formal and quality assessment, should also be assessed against the State aid regulations in order to avoid the risk of incompliance with the relevant State aid rules, should the State aid relevant activities be planned by the project.

Therefore, the Interreg South Baltic Programme hereby invites qualified individuals to apply as prospective independent experts for the assessment of the state aid compliance of project proposals submitted to the Interreg South Baltic Programme in the framework of 2021-2027 calls for proposals.

3. Requirements regarding the profiles of the experts

In order to establish a pool of external State Aid experts, the JS is looking for experienced specialists who will form the external State Aid assessment team. Prospective independent experts are expected to have the high level of professional experience in the area of State aid in projects that can be supported by the Programme's Priority Axes and the respective Specific Objectives. Hence, applicants must fulfill the following requirements:

- Have a university degree;
- Have at least 5 years of professional experience, following the award of the university degree, in the area of state aid;

- Knowledge of State aid EU regulations and related judgments provided by the European Court of Justice;
- Experience in the application of the state aid discipline to activities typical for the European Territorial Cooperation projects, such as training and professional services to beneficiaries, pilot investments, SME support provisions etc.;
- Have experience in assessment or evaluation tasks at programme and/or project level;
- Be fluent in speaking, reading and writing in English (at least at C1 level).
- Experience in the assessment of proposals for cooperation projects under national, European or international funding programmes as well as under programmes directly managed by the European Commission is considered as an advantage.

4. Tasks to be accomplished

The tasks to be accomplished by the expert consist of the assessment of any potential State aid relevant activities in submitted project proposals, to be executed under the coordination of the JS on the basis of the applicable EU regulations and Regulation of the Minister of Development Funds and Regional Policy. The latter Regulation can be accessed at <https://southbaltic.eu/state-aid1>

Experts have to follow relevant programme documents including the Programme document of the South Baltic Programme 2021-2027, the Programme Manual, the application package as well as the guidelines for applicants that can be found at www.southbaltic.eu

The State aid assessment will be performed by external, independent experts and refer to project activities in the light of the State aid regulations. The assessment will aim at reviewing the project and its activities in order to determine if there are any activities that fall under the scope of State aid and if so, what State aid category should be applied to them. Each assessment will have to take into account potential existence of state aid granted directly to the project partner, as well as state aid granted to final beneficiaries of the project through project activities (e.g. trainings organised by project partners for SMEs). The assessment will be carried out on the basis of information submitted in the Application Form and other specific information that may be needed for performing the assessment which might be requested from the project applicants by the JS in coordination with the expert.

As the first step the assessment of state aid will have to be performed against the following questions:

- Are applicants to be regarded as undertakings carrying out economic activities in the context of the project?
- Is the aid giving an economic advantage (a benefit), which an undertaking would not have obtained under normal market conditions?
- Is the aid selectively favoring certain undertakings?

- Does the aid distort (or threaten to distort) competition and trade within the European Union?

Should the outcome of the first step of the assessment indicate the presence of the State aid relevant project activities, these have to be further verified in accordance with proper regulations and different possible kinds of aid.

The assessment work carried out by the expert is to be documented through the filling-in of state aid checklist for each assessed project proposal. The expert is expected to complete each section of the aforementioned checklist. Experts carrying out the assessment will be requested to give justification of their assessment on the project and its activities, as well as provide advice on the necessary solution that should be applied onto the state aid relevant activities.

During the assessment process, where state aid relevant activities are determined; experts will be required to give specific recommendations that will be used by the MA/JS when drafting conditions for project approval and/or specific conditions to be included in the subsidy contract. Recommendations formulated by the experts can be of the following nature:

- Elimination of the aid through additional arrangements or changes of the activity, or;
- Granting state aid using one of the approved state aid schemes.

The expert's conclusions must be presented in a clearly structured and comprehensive way, making it possible for the JS to justify the outcome of the assessment and in case of State aid relevant activities, the application of the most suitable State aid scheme. In case of recommending a project proposal for funding, the expert shall define specific recommendations, conditions and/or clarifications for necessary amendments during the clarification phase. In case of insufficient quality of the assessments provided or essential discrepancies occur between assessments of the experts and JS staff members, experts might be asked to discuss their assessments with the JS and the Programme's Managing Authority in the frame of the consolidation process. Therefore, they have to ensure their availability also after the delivery of the assessments.

5. Application and selection procedure

Applications may be submitted at any time, however the deadline for participating in the assessment of project proposals received under the 2nd call for proposals is **17 December 2023** (please note that the 2nd call for proposals is open from 5 October to 30 November 2023). Applications submitted after this date will be considered only for the assessment of future calls for project proposals.

Interested experts who fulfil the above-described requirements should submit their applications by e-mail to the following address: **southbaltic@southbaltic.eu**. Please use the enclosed application form to provide the requested information. Application must be submitted as an electronically signed document or as a signed scan.

Only those candidates who meet the criteria set out under point 3 will be included in the pool of experts. The successful experts will be informed about their inclusion in the South Baltic's experts' pool for the State aid assessment. Experts will be included in the pool for the entire Programming period 2021-2027. However, it shall be noted that the inclusion in the experts' pool does not guarantee the selection and appointment for assessment of project proposals.

The experts successfully included in the pool might be appointed to assess projects proposals basing on:

- their availability in a given timeframe
- their impartiality to perform assessment (submitted impartiality declarations will be verified by the JS).

6. Work schedule

Estimated timeframe of the assessment process

Time frame	Experts' involvement
Up to 2 months (after the closure of each call for proposals)	appointment of the experts to particular projects; verifying experts' availability; signing contracts with the appointed experts;
month 2-3	assessment of the projects; delivery of the assessment to the JS;
month 3	being available for clarifications;

The first call for proposals is open till 30 November 2023, thus it is expected that experts will be involved in the project assessment in January 2024 and shall be also available in case of clarifications until end of February 2024. Please note that the concrete dates of the assessment period and the deadline for the delivery of work will be included in the contracts and will be set on an individual basis.



7. Remuneration

The expert is entitled to a fee of EUR 315 (gross) per each project proposal assessed. One expert may receive more than one project for assessment within one call.