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Sustainable development in rural regions of Slovakia: the role of the National Rural Development Programm

Abstract: *Traditional farming systems and other activities such as craftsmanship (e.g. manufacturing activities, local food production), represent a sustainable example of human integration with the nature. Their maintenance and development, with opportune adaptations to the current socio-economic situation and cultural/technological advancements are, therefore, valuable (Gobattoni et al., 2015). Agriculture has long been one of the main driving forces shaping landscape. However, since the 1950s, the role played by the agricultural sector in society has changed as a consequence of mechanization and technological advances, globalisation processes and new social needs (Randelli et al., 2014; Van Eupen et al., 2012). In post-war Europe, industrialization and new demographic trends have led to the Urbanization phenomenon (Schewenius et al., 2014), with the rapid growth of cities, soil sealing through intensified construction and the depopulation of rural areas (Crafts and Toniolo, 1996). The deep transformations experienced by agriculture have impacted not only the rural community economy, employment and social dynamics, but also the nature and the environment (Schouten et al., 2013; Hanley et al., 2012; McManus et al., 2012) and, in general, on the supply of the so-called ecosystem and landscape services (De Groot et al., 2010; Hermann et al., 2011; Zanten et al., 2014). The paper deals with the presentation of the role of the National Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 in the development of rural regions of Slovakia. The number of supported projects, allocation of resources, and their efficiency will be evaluated with respect to regional dispersion and innovative potential of supported projects.*

Keywords: *agricultural policy, rural development, regional development, Slovakia, support*

With respect to the nature of the territory and population density, Slovakia is a rural country. The Eurostat methodology defines a rural region as an administrative unit structured according to the level of rurality, by the rate of the number of people living in rural villages and the total number of inhabitants in the region. The criterion for classification as rural settlement and urban settlement is population density per square kilometre, with a threshold of 150 inhabitants per square kilometre. The average population density in the Slovak Republic (SR) is 110 inhabitants per square kilometre (MARD SR, 2017). Rural regions are also generally characterized by the fact that the share of the population of the region living in rural municipalities is greater than 50%, prevalingly rural regions have a share of 15-50% and prevalingly urbanised regions have a share of inhabitants less than 15%. Altogether, 95% of the Slovak territory is covered by rural regions which are inhabited by 88% from 5.4 million of the Slovak residents.

In the past, Slovakia was also considered to be a typical farmland. However, the focus of the economy has been declining in the recent years. Nevertheless, Slovakia spreads over 49 036 km² and 88% of this areas is used by the agricultural sector (48% is covered by agricultural land and 40% by forest). The agricultural land is predominated by arable land (71%) and permanent grassland (28%). Moreover, 65% of agricultural land is classified as affected by natural constraints, which are strongly limiting its production potential. In consequence of this, 20% of the agricultural area is of high nature value, while NATURA2000 sites cover 16% of agricultural land and 46% of forests (EC, 2016). These facts greatly influence the production potential and population density mostly in mountain areas (Fig. 1).

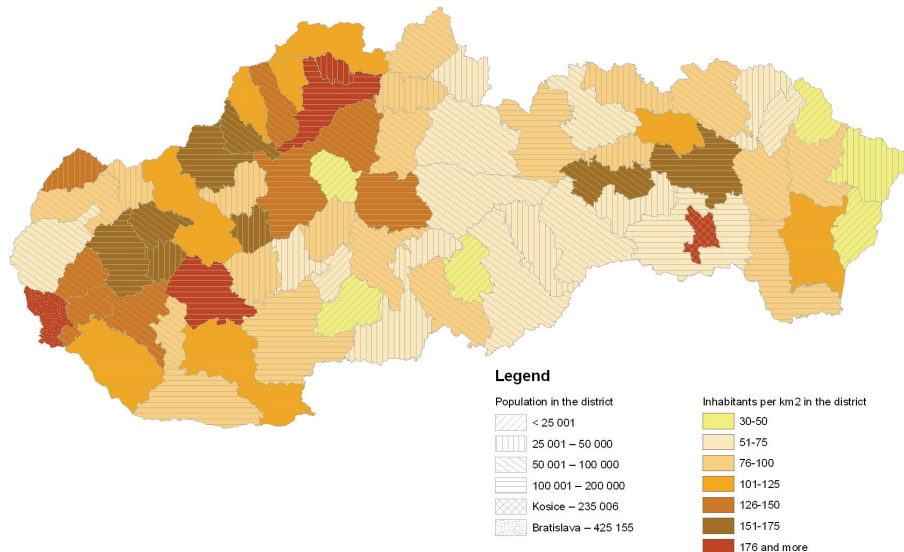


Figure 1. Population in Slovak districts

Source: European Environment Agency (2015).

The basic prerequisite for the harmonious coexistence in community is ensuring equality for all citizens. Slovakia has been a member of the European Union since 2004. However, ensuring equality of Slovaks and other Europeans is difficult, given that there are still various disparities within the country, which are visible mostly on the regional level. The citizens' standard of living, unemployment rate as well as availability of infrastructure varies among individual regions. Counterbalancing the disparities is one of the EU's priorities and, therefore, the competent authorities have developed a common system for classifying and evaluating the regions. The Statistical Office of the European Union created the NUTS (*La Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales Statistiques*) methodology to statistically monitor and analyse the social and economic situation in the regions. It is used to consider the needs of the regions as well as to determine the suitability of the individual EU regional policy instruments for specific regions (NSRR SR, 2017). The Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic regulated this by Act No. 221/1996, which divides Slovak regions into 5 classifications (NUTS I – Slovakia; NUTS II – 4 main regions: Bratislava Region, Western Slovakia, Central Slovakia, Eastern Slovakia; NUTS III – 8 regions: Bratislava, Trnava, Trenčín, Nitra, Žilina, Banská Bystrica, Prešov, Košice; NUTS IV – 79 districts; and NUTS V – 2890 municipalities) (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. NUTS II and NUTS III regions in Slovakia

Source: Government Office SR (2010).

According to the OECD (2016), Slovakia is on the 4th position out of 33 states with the biggest regional disparities. The indicators of economic development, based on the OECD data from 2014, consider the states with the largest regional disparity in income indicators (29th position among 32 countries, measured based on disposable income per household member in purchasing power parity) and jobs (21st of the 33 countries surveyed, measured on the basis of employment and unemployment rates). These disparities are manifested through several socio-economic indicators, mostly showing the differences

between Bratislava region and the rest of Slovak regions. Out of 263 EU regions, Bratislava region is on the 96th position in Regional Competitiveness Index and 3rd position in GDP per capita. Western Slovakia is ranked 196th (both on the basis of the Competitiveness Index and the GDP *per capita*), on average Slovakia is 211th (index) and 226th (GDP) and Eastern Slovakia up to 225th (index) and 241st (GDP) place (Goliaš, 2017). One of the biggest socio-economic problems in Slovakia is also the unfair distribution of job opportunities and the associated poverty-stricken areas. About half of the vacancies are in the Bratislava region, where nearly two-thirds of job-seekers come from Prešov, Košice and Banská Bystrica. Most people below the poverty line are in the regions of Banská Bystrica and Prešov. Poverty in Slovakia threatens mainly households with at least three children and incomplete families with at least one child. According to INECO (2017), there is evident high correlation (0.79) between the poverty rate and the share of the Roma population. In addition to these problems, systematic support for regional development in Slovakia is of considerable importance. Regional development should be supported by horizontal and vertical coordination, taking into consideration the diversity of Slovak regions. It is also the intention of the government to create and implement socio-economic instruments that will reduce regional disparities, increase the competitiveness of the regions and hence the quality of life (GO SR, 2017).

Material and Methods

The paper represents the system of funding rural development (RD) in Slovakia through Rural Development Programmes (RDP) in connection with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

The research period between 2014 and 2020 was chosen according to planning periods of the EU. Close attention is paid to the allocation of the IROP budget into five priority axes and the selected time periods (before 2017, 2017 and 2018-2020). Moreover, the specific allocation into the following axes is examined based on the situation of calls announced as of 10.08.2017: 1. Safe and environmentally friendly transport in the regions, 2. Easier access to efficient and better public services, 3. Mobilization of creative potential in the regions, 4. Improving the quality of life in regions with a focus on the environment. Finally, rural development in Slovakia is explained on the case studies: “New places in preschools across Slovakia”, “Ecological and faster public transport in Bratislava” and “Cycling in Nitra region”.

Results and Discussion

This part presents the specific allocation of the ERDF and the IROP sources into priority axes of the Rural Development Programme in Slovakia.

Rural development (RD) is the term used to identify activities and initiatives aimed at enhancing living standards in areas out of urban areas. RD activities are mainly focused on the social and economic development of areas. Rural development policy, as part of the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union, helps to achieve sustainable rural development. It is supported by the European Community countries from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) connected with the rural development programmes in each country. Alongside the EAFRD, regional development is supported also by the Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund (CF) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).

There are three Operational Programmes (OP) connected to the three priorities of rural development in Slovakia: development of the regions, support for the district of Bratislava and cross-border cooperation (MARD SR, 2017). The main objective of the Regional Operational Programme (ROP) is to increase the availability and quality of civilian infrastructure and facilities in the convergence objective regions. The ROP provides for non-repayable financial contribution for local authorities, self-governing regions and municipalities (MARD SR, 2017). Special Operational Programme Bratislava Region pursues the objective of regional competitiveness and employment, aimed at strengthening the Bratislava region by developing a knowledge-based economy and building a region attractive for life. Support is determined for the capital city of Bratislava, municipalities and small and medium-sized enterprises from Bratislava region (NSRR SR, 2017). Operational programmes for cross-border cooperation are funded by the European Regional Development Fund. Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) is a key element of the EU policy towards its neighbours. The CBC programmes are intended to promote the harmonious and balanced development of the EU territory. Programmes covered regions located at state borders to stimulate cooperation and exchange of experience between the regions (EC, 2017).

Support programmes are being prepared within the EU on the basis of intensive consultations between the EC, Slovak Republic and other competent authorities. In preparation for this process, the decentralization of key competences took place in Slovakia. In December 2001, in the context of the reform of the public administration, the regional level of self-government – the self-government of the Higher Territorial Units (HTC), was gradually established. In this process the HTC took over a range of competencies from the state administration (Act No. 416/2001). At this time, Act no. 503/2001 support for regional development was also adopted. This provided the framework for the harmonization of national legislation with the *acquis communautaire* – a basic law allowing for full application of the principles of regional policy in the Slovak Republic and the participation of the country in the Structural and Cohesion Policy of the EU.

The European Union supports RD activities through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Rural development in Slovakia is, therefore, advanced through the measures of the Rural Development Programme of the Slovak Republic and the Operational Programme for Fisheries of the Slovak Republic. Individual parts of this scheme are direct payments designed as direct support for farmers.

In the next EU programming period of 2007-2013, Slovakia adopted the Rural Development Programme of the Slovak Republic 2007-2013 (RDP SR 2007-2013). This includes support for modernization, innovation and efficiency of agricultural, food and forestry enterprises, preservation and protection of the country's environmental values, preservation of cultural heritage, job creation, increasing the rural population's expertise and improving the quality of life on rural areas. The RDP SR 2007-2013 was a tool for support of rural development policy as a part of the EU's second pillar of the CAP. According to the EC (2014), the programme was implemented through measures under five axes: Axis 1 – Increasing the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector, Axis 2 – Improving the environment and landscape, Axis 3 – Quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy, Axis 4 – Implementation of the Leader approach, Axis 5 – Operations of technical assistance. The total amount of public funds (Table 1) for this seven-year period was EUR 2 597 053 717 (EAFRD: EUR 1 996 908 078, state budget of SR: EUR 600 145 639). The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) contributed to the Convergence regions in the amount of EUR 1 958 307 486 and EUR 38 600 592 to non-convergence regions (MARD SR, 2012)

The programme for the current period (Rural Development Programme for 2014-2020) was formally adopted by the European Commission in 2015 (EC, 2016) and it runs under the “new” Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which gives preference to projects with a participative approach presented for funding covered by the Common Strategic Framework 2014-2020 programming. This outlined Slovakia's priorities for using EUR 2.1 billion of public money available for the 7-year period (EUR 1 545 million from the EU budget and EUR 534 million of national funding). The RDP is based on 6 priorities: 1. Fostering knowledge transfer in agriculture, forestry and rural areas, 2. Enhancing the competitiveness of all types of agriculture and enhancing farm viability, 3. Promoting food chain organization and risk management in agriculture, 4. Restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems dependent on agriculture and forestry, 5. Promoting resource efficiency and supporting the shift toward a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy in agriculture, food and forestry sectors, and 6. Promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas (ENRD, 2017). Priority 1 is incorporated into remaining 5 priorities and priority 4 was considered as main priority in Slovakia. These priorities were combined into the Integrated Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020 (IROP SR) which consists of six axes: 1. Safe and environmentally friendly transport in the regions, 2. Easier access to effective and quality public services, 3. Mobilizing creative potential in the

regions, 4. Improving the quality of life in the regions with an emphasis on the environment, 5. Community-Led Local Development, and 6. Technical Assistance, which is incorporated into axes 1 to 5. The budget for these axes for 2014-2020 is 2.1 billion of public money (EUR 1 545 million from the EU budget and EUR 534 million of national funding). Figure 3 shows allocation of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in the 2014-2020 programming period.

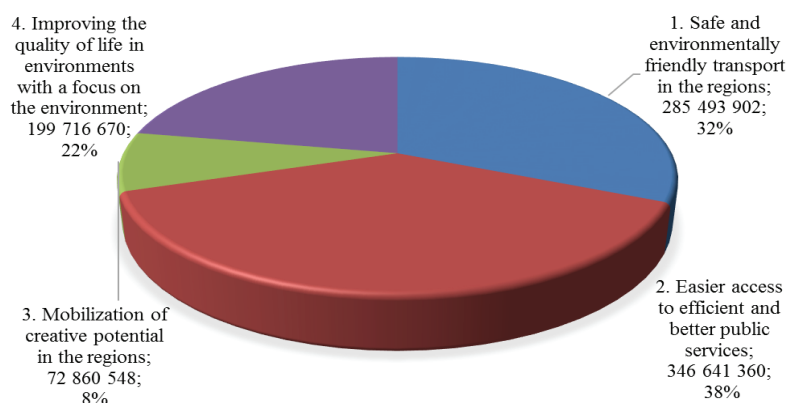


Figure 3. Allocation of the ERDF in the 2014-2020 programming period

Source: MARD SR (2017).

The biggest amount of ERDF budget in the Programming Period 2014-2020 will be directed to Axis 2. Easier access to effective and quality public services (38%) and Axis 1. Safe and environmentally friendly transport in the regions (32%). Allocation from this budget to Improving the quality of life in the regions (Axis 4) will be 22% and just 8% is intended for Axis 3. Mobilizing creative potential in the regions.

Table 1. Integrated Regional Operational Programme – IROP / Overview of announced and planned calls to 10.8.2017

Priority axis	IROP (EUR)	Announced calls (EUR)	%	Planned calls 2017 (EUR)	% 2017	Planned calls 2018-20
Axis 1	421 000 000	285 466 902	68	0	0	32
Axis 2	755 913 197	346 641 360	46	84 763 397	11	43
Axis 3	215 860 548	72 860 548	34	143 000 000	66	0
Axis 4	84 763 397	199 716 670	100	0	0	0
Axis 5	100 000 000	0	0	100 000 000	100	0
Total	1 754 490 415	934 003 419	53	327 763 397	19	28

Source: MARD SR (2017).

The total planned allocation of the IROP budget is slightly different. As shown in Table 1, more than 43% of this budget is intended to Axis 2 (EUR 755 913 197) while until October 2017 just 46% of this amount was announced. There is a plan of competent authorities to spend another EUR 84 763 397 in 2017 and the rest of 43% in 2018-2020. According to the past experiences, Slovakia is not very successful in obtaining money from the EU. In spite of the fact that the full amount of Axis 4 (EUR 84 763 397) was announced before October 2017, there seems to be a problem with the rest of the funds. There was a plan to obtain the full amount of Axes 3, 4 and 5 until 2018, while 66% of Axis 3 and 100% of Axis 5 would have to be used in the third quarter of 2017. Especially, obtaining funds for Axis 5 – Community-Led Local Development, seems to be the biggest problem since its full budget should be settled in 2017. Even if all these plans are filled, there will still remain 28% for 2018-2020. In the above-mentioned Axis 2, there will still remain 32% of budget for Axis 1 – Safe and environmentally friendly transport in the regions.

Specific allocation of the IROP to priority Axes – calls announced on 10.08.2017

The total allocation of resources to the individual priority axes described above is subdivided into sub-envelopes according to the objectives set for each priority. The biggest amount of the budget for priority Axis 1. Safe and environmentally friendly transport in the regions, has so far been (before 10.08.2017) referred to specific objective 1.1 Improving accessibility to TEN-T road infrastructure and class I roads (EUR 140 855 695). Figure 4 also shows EUR 81 830 693 for specific objective 1.2.2 Cycling whose practical use is described in one of the attached case studies.

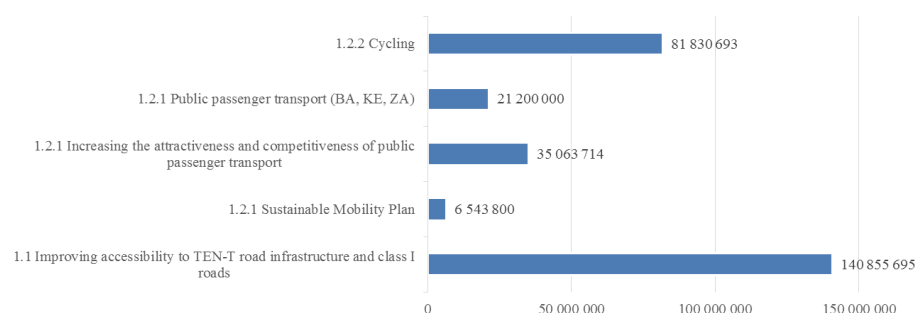


Figure 4. Specific allocation of the IROP to Priority Axis 1

Source: MARD SR (2017).

So far, Axis 2 – Easier access to efficient and better public services is relatively evenly distributed (Fig. 5), in which allocation to specific objectives is in the range from EUR 37 billion (2.2.2 Primary schools) to almost EUR 95 billion (2.2.3 Secondary vocational schools). Specific allocation of EUR 77 157 690 for specific objective 2.2.1 Kindergartens, is described in the case study as well.

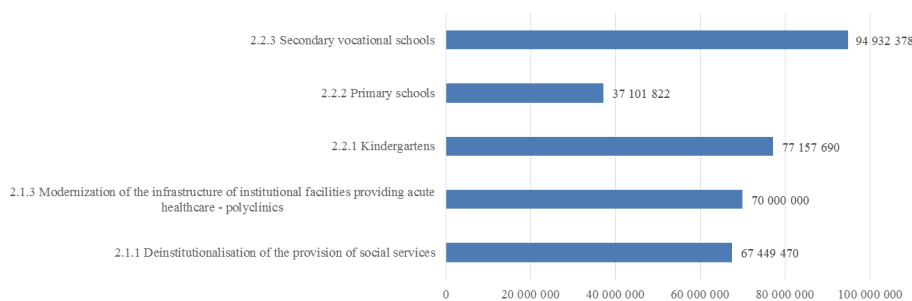


Figure 5. Specific allocation of the IROP to Priority Axis 2

Source: MARD SR (2017).

The budget for Axis 3. Mobilization of creative potential in the regions, is distributed to two separate objectives. Its major part was directed to the specific objective 3.1 Creation of jobs in the cultural and creative industries – decentralized support (EUR 67 860 548) and the rest in the amount of EUR 5 billion is intended to 3.1 Written invitation to submit a NFP application for the implementation of financial instruments (Fig. 6).

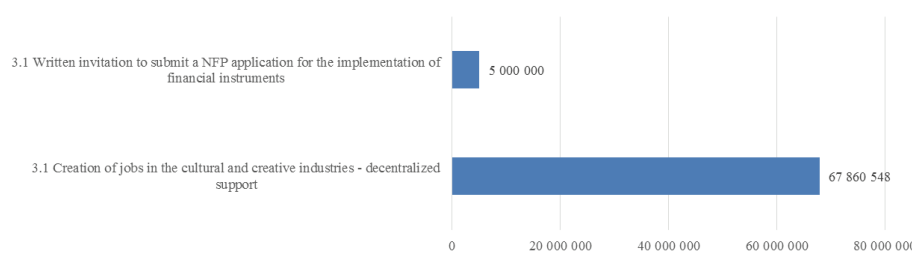


Figure 6. Specific allocation of the IROP to Priority Axis 3

Source: MARD SR (2017).

Although, the environmental aspect should be taken into consideration in all priority axes, it is especially focused on Axis 4 – Improving the quality of life in regions, with an emphasis on the environment. One of the highest amounts for separate specific objectives was earmarked for 4.1 Increasing the energy efficiency of apartment homes (EUR 111 388 554). The remaining two objectives of Axis 4 were supported by a considerably smaller amounts (Fig. 7): 4.2.1 Drinking water supply, public sewerage (EUR 55 000 000), and 4.3.1 Elements of Green Infrastructure and elements of reducing air and noise pollution (EUR 33 328 116).

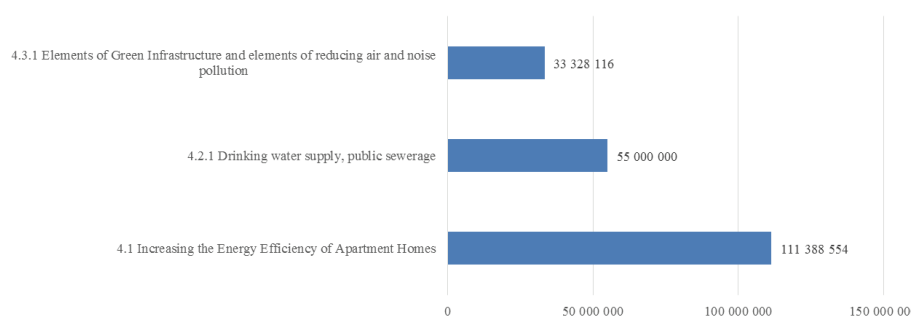


Figure 7. Specific allocation of the IROP to Priority Axis 4

Source: MARD SR (2017).

Case Studies

The case studies are presented to demonstrate the practical side of using the IROP resources. These link three projects which are contributing to the development of Slovak regions.

New capacities in preschools across Slovakia

In 2016, more than twelve thousand (12 486) applications for admission of a child to a preschool were not recorded across Slovakia. The lack of free spots in these facilities influenced also economic situation of thousands families that were stuck with the one source of income for the household as mothers could not work. State responded operatively and in relatively short time supported the construction of new facilities and the expansion of existing ones. In 2017, there were 4780 new spots in preschools across Slovakia, which were created through 152 projects for almost EUR 40 million to be paid from the EU funds. In addition, another EUR 37 million are available for the next years. In connection with this it is necessary to mention, that preferred were projects from cities and municipalities where there are at least 30% of inhabitants of the Marginaliza Roma Community. This was caused by the already mentioned link between poverty / unemployment and Roma Community, while this problem is visible mostly in less-developed regions. The IROP funds were in this case invested into building of new facilities for nursery schools, expanding of the capacities of existing buildings, constructing of buildings and premises and acquiring of material and technical equipment to increase the energy efficiency of buildings.

Ecological and faster public transport in Bratislava

The Dopravný podnik Bratislava – operator of transport services in Bratislava region plans to buy 18 new city electric buses at an estimated cost of EUR 11.29 million excluding VAT (EUR 13.55 million including tax). This green investment should be co-financed from the IROP under the priority Axis 2 Safe and environ-

mentally friendly transport in the regions. This investment is a part of a larger project implemented in cooperation with the public and private sector with the goal “to make public transport in the capital of Slovakia faster and cheaper than passenger transport”. State-owned transporter, Slovak Railways, in connection with this build new bus and tram stops, which will speed up the crossings and in addition the City of Bratislava will modernize three whole tramlines. Public transport in the Slovak capital city could, thus, be brought closer to its efficiency through public transport systems in other developed EU metropolises.

Cycling in Nitra region

According to the Concept of Cycling in Nitra, strategic document approved by the City Council and City Parliament in 2015 and the projects designed in cooperation between the Municipality of Nitra departments and external staff planners, City of Nitra applied for the ERDF funding via the Integrated Regional Operational Programme with altogether 8 applications. Five projects have been approved so far, and another 3 are currently in evaluation with expected positive outcome. Thus in 2018, 20.5 km of new cycling routes within the cadastre area of the city will be constructed and put into use, out of the total allocation amounting to EUR 5 006 233, EUR 4 978 514 will be spend, which represents 99.45% effectiveness.

In July 2017, a new project of Bike sharing system as a result of cooperation between the Arriva Company (Nitra public transportation provider) and the City of Nitra was opened to the public. In total 7 bike sharing stations in the City Centre (locations approved by the City Architect Department in accordance to the Concept of Cycling in Nitra) with 70 bicycles equipped with GPS modules are daily available to the inhabitants and visitors of the City. The first feedback is very positive, during the first month of use, the bikes were borrowed more than 4000 times. As a result, ongoing discussion on the topic of new locations for the Bike sharing stations could be followed via the social media nowadays, where the provider is asking about the public opinion concerning the expansion of the service.

Conclusions

Slovakia is according to the nature of the territory and population density, a typical rural country. Altogether, 95% of the Slovak territory is covered by rural regions which are inhabited by 88% from 5.4 million of the Slovak residents. The country covers 49 036 km² and 88% of it is used by the agricultural sector. Although Slovakia entered the EU in 2004, there are still considerable regional differences. It is on the 4th position (out of 33 OECD countries) among countries with the greatest regional disparities, which are visible through several socio-economic indicators and it can be concluded, that there is a main difference between the Bratislava region and the rest of the Slovak regions. The main tool to mitigate these differences is to implement projects co-financed from the EU. Within the current 2014-2020 programming period EUR 1545 billion from the

EU budget and EUR 534 million from national funding are allocated for rural development in Slovakia. These funds are divided into six priority axes specified in the Integrated Regional Operational Programme 2014-2020 (IROP SR): 1. Safe and environmentally friendly transport in the regions, 2. Easier access to effective and quality public services, 3. Mobilizing creative potential in the regions, 4. Improving the quality of life in regions with an emphasis on the environment, 5. Community-Led Local Development, and 6. Technical Assistance. The budget for these Axes is 2.1 billion of public money (EUR 1545 billion from the EU budget and EUR 534 billion from national funding). As in the previous periods, Slovakia has reserves in the obtaining these resources, and actually there is also the risk, that some parts of these resources will remain unspent.

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