



# Towards simplification Analysis of selection of operations

Taking stock of practices in the EU Member States

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# **Towards simplification**

## **Analysis of selection of operations**

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## Abstract

The primary purpose of the study “Towards simplification – Analysis of selection of operations – Taking stock of practices in the EU Member States” was to map and disseminate information on the practices and procedures that authorities responsible for the management of the ERDF, ESF, and Cohesion Fund have been applying, regarding the selection of operations in the 2014-2020 programming period. Based on detailed information collected from a sample of 29 operational programmes and 87 calls for proposal, and drawing upon consultations with Managing Authorities, Intermediate Bodies and beneficiaries, an analysis of the key steps of a selection process (from call design to proposal appraisal, until signing contracts with beneficiaries) was carried out. This analysis made it possible to highlight the key features of each step (e.g. timing, effort, involved human resources, used tools, digitalization, selection criteria and methods etc.).

Furthermore, challenges faced during a selection process, including gold plating, and good practices have been described while recommendations for enhancing efficiency have been proposed. These suggest, for example, to: exploit the peer learning and knowledge sharing potential emerging from a wide varied of existing practices across Member States; make sure that each call has a clear focus and is developed on the basis of a clear intervention logic; reduce the administrative burden through digitalization, standardization and effective complaint management; ensuring sufficient human resources and their effective management; promote innovative and “closer to applicant” communication and support. In addition to this report, a handbook of practices was developed, to provide examples of good practices for the effective selection of operations.

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>CFP</b>	Call for proposals
<b>CPR 2014-2020</b>	Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the ERDF, the ESF, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the ERDF, the ESF, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006
<b>CPR 2021-2027</b>	Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and The Council laying down common provisions on the ERDF, the ESF Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy
<b>ERDF</b>	European Regional Development Fund
<b>ESI Funds</b>	European Structural and Investment Funds
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>FTE</b>	Full time equivalent
<b>IB</b>	Intermediate Body
<b>Interreg</b>	European territorial cooperation
<b>IP</b>	Investment Priority
<b>IT</b>	Information Technology
<b>MA</b>	Managing Authority
<b>MC</b>	Monitoring Committee
<b>OP</b>	Operational Programme
<b>TO</b>	Thematic Objective

## Executive Summary

### *Purpose of this report*

The present report is one of the outputs of the European Commission project “Towards simplification – Analysis of selection of operations – Taking stock of practices in the EU Member States”. The aim is to take stock of and disseminate information on the practices and procedures that authorities responsible for managing the ERDF, ESF, and Cohesion Fund in EU Member States have been applying regarding the selection of operations in the programming period 2014–2020.

In particular, this report provides a synthesis of the findings of an analysis of practices, procedures, and criteria used to select operations in a sample of 29 Operational Programmes (OP) and identifies challenges, good practices, and lessons.

### *Selection of operations at OP level*

Different approaches to the selection of operations can be found across OPs. The Monitoring Committee (MC) approves **both general and specific selection criteria** in approximately half of the analysed programmes. As regards **general criteria**, the MC intervenes at **various levels** (e.g. OP, Thematic objective (TO), investment priority (IP), priority axis level) depending on the programme. In the OPs where the MC approves only general selection criteria, specific selection criteria are approved by the MA or sectoral committees, depending on the programme.

In some cases, though, there are both general and specific criteria. In some OPs, only general selection criteria exist; in others, only call-specific criteria are defined. Usually, the MC approves the general selection criteria at the beginning of the programming period, while specific criteria are typically approved before a call for proposal (CFP) is launched.

On average, around 186 calendar days (approx. half a year) are needed to approve the general selection criteria after the approval of the OP. This number varies significantly across the OPs, ranging from cases in which the programme approval date coincides roughly with the approval of general

selection criteria to other cases where, before the general criteria are adopted, more than one year has elapsed after the date of OP approval. On average, the total number of general criteria is 22 but varies significantly across OPs, from a minimum of 6 to a maximum of 65 in the considered sample.

66.7% of the total budget of the sampled OPs is allocated through competitive calls, while 33.3% is allocated through non-competitive procedures (direct awards). Direct award procedures prevail in the cases of Technical Assistance and, though to a lesser extent, in TO7 (promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures) and TO8 (Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility). Direct award procedures are commonly used for financing regional and local entities and to support infrastructure development, the improvement of administrative capacity and public service delivery, water management, and environmental protection projects.

### *Selection of operation at call for proposals level*

A sub-sample of 87 calls was extracted from the sample of 29 OPs (i.e. three calls per programme) for a more detailed analysis. The budget of these calls was EUR 4,270.9 million (around 1% of total ERDF and CF resources). Although this sample is not statistically representative, the results do offer important insights into the strengths and weaknesses of actual practices across the EU when considering the geographical and thematic coverage of the analysis and the fact that it covers different selection procedures.

The average effort required for selecting operations, namely the Full-Time Equivalent days (FTE days) from the launch of a CFP until the signing of the last contract, is 373 FTE days for the OPs covered in the analysis.

The appraisal of the proposals is the most burdensome step of the process; in terms of FTE days, it accounts, on average, for 46.6% of the total effort (195 FTE days), followed by the step of contract preparation & signature, which represents 26.2% of the effort (110 FTE days). Regarding calendar days spent

selecting operations, there is a considerable variety across OPs and types of calls. As expected, for competitive calls, the selection process lasts more than twice the average length of a direct award (and, in terms of effort, is approx. 1.6 times more demanding). On average, over two years (640 calendar days) elapse from the launch of a call until the end of the appraisal of proposals. In our sample, this ranges from less than 200 to more than 1,600 calendar days.

### *Call preparation and submission of applications*

In 75% of the calls for which information was available, needs analysis or market research was conducted during the **preparation of an intervention**, 25% of the calls did not avail themselves of needs or market research as they relied on recent experience from past calls and analysis of the progress of existing initiatives. For needs and market analysis, the most common practice was to resort to various partners and stakeholders, rely on inter-institutional and public consultations, and other means such as workshops etc.

**The MC approves call-specific selection criteria** in about half of the analysed calls. In other cases, they are approved by the MA, sectoral committees etc., depending on the exact programme. The number of specific selection criteria ranges from a minimum of one to a maximum of 68. Most frequently, the number of specific criteria ranges between 11-30.

Specific selection criteria include eligibility, quality and priority criteria. On average, in our sample, each call has 18 eligibility, 9 quality and 3 priority criteria. The number of quality criteria seems to depend more on the context of the programme implementation than the TO or type of call. Cost-related criteria were used in 44% of the calls of the sample. For these, on average, 21% of the final score was related to costs, and in some OPs, cost-related thresholds are part of the eligibility criteria.

A higher number of selection criteria is correlated to longer selection processes: higher FTE days needed to carry out the entire selection process and a higher percentage of complaints and legal appeals. Many selection criteria are also associated

with lower clarity of criterion (how they are defined and calculated) and the CFP documents. Calls with highly burdensome selection criteria are characterised by a longer duration of the evaluation process. In particular, the number of calendar days for evaluating a single application is almost twice (13.5) compared to the calls for which criteria are considered less burdensome (6.9).

When **drafting a CFP**, authorities of the sampled OPs produced nearly 12 documents per call, on average, taking them 2.6 full working days to prepare each document. On average, around 10 documents are needed to prove eligibility. Despite their proven utility, public consultations are used in a few cases. Indeed, when public consultations are carried out, fewer questions on the call documents are received from the applicants during the application process. Furthermore, higher clarity of the call documents means less time needed for proposal appraisal.

**When launching a call**, most MAs disseminate information primarily via their websites. However, social media are gaining greater importance (30% MAs used them as dissemination channels). Various support services are provided to applicants. Around half of the MAs in our sample provide helpdesk services, arrange information meetings or manage a FAQ service. Furthermore, many MAs provide individual feedback via various communication channels (e.g. email, phone, in person). The availability of support to applicants during the application phase results in fewer complaints and legal appeals, as it reduces application mistakes and misunderstandings.

**Application submission** was at least partly digitalised in 85% of the sampled calls. This phase of the selection process is quicker for calls where the task is fully digitalised, suggesting significant efficiency gains in using IT tools in this step. Most digital application systems rely on online application platforms where applicants can fill out forms or upload their application documents. In 40% of the calls, automated checks also optimise and speed up the process further. When IT solutions for submitting applications are internally interoperable with IT solutions used in other selection steps (e.g. for the appraisal of proposals and communication) and externally interoperable with other databases

and registers, there are important efficiency gains for both public authorities and applicants. Digitalisation generally allows for a time saving of up to 46% during the project appraisal step and up to 91% during the contract signature step; these two steps represent the two most burdensome phases of the selection process. Interoperability also reduces times. In particular, for the calls in the sample that could benefit from external interoperability, compared to the calls that could not or could benefit only to a limited extent, this function allows for a 41% time saving during the project appraisal step.

### *Selection of operations and contracting*

The **appraisal of proposals** is the most demanding step of the selection process which requires, on average, the most significant effort (195 FTE days) and 278.3 calendar days. Such duration ranges considerably from a minimum of 26 days, for direct award call, to a maximum of 1,014 days or more than three years for open-ended competitive call.

Approx. 30 persons on average are involved in this step which is also the most outsourced one as the share of internal personnel is similar (52%) to the share of external people (48%). Outsourcing concerns especially calls under TO1 and TO2 which usually need scientific and technical skills to appraise proposals.

Setting up an Evaluation Committee is a common practice (it was set up in 68 out of 86 calls in our sample) but it is challenging for authorities to involve internal personnel in a timely manner and, when necessary, recruit external experts. Typically, when there is no Evaluation Committee, it is because a direct award procedure is used. In most cases, at least two committee members evaluate each application to avoid bias. There is significant room for improving the appraisal of proposals and the selection of operations by fostering digitalisation. E-solutions to support the appraisal process are still not widely used even though the time needed to assess the quality and priority criteria per application is the lowest for the calls for which the proposal evaluation is digitalised.

Several channels are used to **inform applicants about the outcome of the selection** (e.g. written notifications by post, e-

mail, phone calls, a dedicated IT platform). Almost in all cases, unsuccessful applicants receive some communication with the reasons for rejection and a reminder of their legal options. The average number of complaints received as percentage of submitted applications, is approximately 8% for competitive procedures while the average number of legal appeals as a percentage of submitted applications is nearly 1% (approx. 5% for open-ended calls). To avoid complaints and legal appeals blocking the contracting phase, there are solutions such as keeping a financial buffer or reserve list.

**Signing the contracts** is the second most resource-intensive step in selecting operations. IT tools and digital signatures considerably reduce the effort needed for signing contracts. When IT tools are not used, and the contract needs to be signed on paper, the necessary effort in terms of FTE days is nearly five times the effort needed when contracts can be signed online. Negotiations and adjustments of proposals are relatively common practices (e.g. in 26.1% of the calls there are adjustment of budget, scope of activities, timeframe) which lead to higher FTE days per contract but may save time during the implementation. Providing regular support to applicants is very important at this stage which prevents potential irregularities and financial corrections.

### *Key problems encountered in the selection of operations*

The key problems encountered in the selection process can be grouped in several categories. There are issues related to **governance and legal framework**.

Some OPs faced difficulties in interpreting EU or national legal requirements, particularly in areas such as e.g. conflict of interest, state aid and public procurement.

Administrative culture also has a significant impact on the effectiveness of the selection of operations. In some cases, the validation process entails purely bureaucratic and formal actions, which do not bring any added value to the decision-making process and instead lead to longer decision-making procedures. Inherited administrative cultural issues such as the lack of actual multi-layer coordination can prevent the sharing of lessons learned.

The lack of feedback loops and efficient learning processes, or the perception of a lack of improvements over time in the overall selection of operations, leads to a decline in the trust of the project appraisal process among the target beneficiaries and, sometimes, in the general public.

The **lack of strategic focus and an unclear intervention logic** impacts negatively on the selection of operations. There is a need for thorough consultations with the relevant stakeholders during the call design to ensure that the needs of the territory/target groups are correctly identified and that clear and well-targeted requirements, linked to the objectives of the OP are set out.

Issues related to the **human resources** involved in the selection of operations affect the vast majority of the call for proposal analysed. In several cases, the personnel involved in the appraisal step do not work full time on the evaluation of proposals, but this task adds up to their usual workload. This implies that each evaluator has limited time to dedicate to the assessment of the proposals.

Another important element to consider is whether external evaluators are involved in the process. If not managed properly, the recruitment of the external experts could be quite lengthy.

Problems concerning human resources also include the shortage of technical skills, the high turnover and the scarce experience of the internal staff and/or experts. Problems related to human resources do not only affect the MAs/IBs but also the applicants.

The lack of clear **selection guidelines or methodologies** allows for a high degree of uncertainty in the interpretation and causes delays and inconsistencies in the proposal evaluation outcomes. In some cases, the assessment of the criteria lacks transparency, as the outcome of the assessment and/or the given score is not substantiated by the evaluators' comments and justified based on the assessment methodology.

The **lack of adequate IT** tools in support of each step of the selection process delays the selection of operations. Suitable IT tools are particularly relevant for the proposal appraisal and contract signing steps. The lack of IT tools in support of criteria evaluation has been

identified as an important issue by several MAs/IBs.

### *Recommendations*

Based on the findings of the analysis, key problems encountered and good practices identified a number of recommendations have been made.

**Exploit the considerable peer learning and knowledge sharing potential.** Operation selection practices differ considerably across MS and OPs. Most of the analysed OPs provided information on good practices related to specific steps or activities of the selection process that could be shared with other OPs in order to support MAs in improving their selection processes. Therefore, we recommend that the considerable peer learning and knowledge sharing potential is further exploited through several means such as informal exchanges across OPs within the same country or similar OPs across Europe. This could also include participation in specific Peer2Peer+ exchange programs/platforms, and active participation in other networks, expert groups, communities of practices, etc. DG REGIO should proactively encourage experience sharing initiatives, disseminating examples of efficient operation selection practices and procedures to all relevant Member State authorities.

**Define a clear intervention logic of the call.** Clear intervention logic and a focused approach are important preconditions for a smooth selection process. To facilitate this, the authority may: Promote a participatory approach during the call preparation and design; Build up the call for proposals based on lessons learned from previous interventions; Define a limited number of well-targeted selection criteria.

**Reducing the administrative burden.** To reduce the burden for both the applicants and authorities, it is highly recommended to: Digitalise the entire selection process and improve interoperability; Standardise processes and documents; Ensure effective complaint management to avoid delays and blockages in the selection process and make it possible to continue with the contracting phase, while assessing the complaints (e.g. by keeping aside a financial reserve).



**Ensuring sufficient human resources and their effective management.**

In many of the observed OPs, the human resources available for the selection process, especially in the appraisal phase, were insufficient in terms of both numbers and required competences. Some practices can help the authorities overcome these challenges: Mobilise external personnel and the evaluators in advance, based on previous experience or estimations and by means of framework contracts and inter-institutional exchanges; Train evaluators and ensure consistency in proposal evaluations also by providing detailed guidelines.

**Ensure effective communication and support to applicants.**

To effectively communicate with the applicants and provide them support, it is recommended to: Utilize social media to broaden the reach of the call for proposals, in addition to standard communication channels; Make available wide range of support measures, including Q&A, information sessions, specialised training for the beneficiaries on specific aspects of the applications (e.g. business plan, market analysis, financial projections, etc.). When appropriate, individual pre-application counselling, engaging also sectoral experts, can be very effective; Maintain an open and accessible communication channel; Provide feedback and suggestions, including to non-selected applicants, in order to increase transparency and motivate them to apply for future funding opportunities.

## 1. Introduction: Objectives of the analysis and report structure

The European Commission assignment “Towards simplification – Analysis of selection of operations – Taking stock of practices in the EU Member States” is aimed at **taking stock of and disseminating information on the practices and procedures** that authorities responsible for the management of the ERDF, ESF and Cohesion Fund in EU Member States have been applying as regards the selection of operations in the programming period 2014–2020. The study has produced two main outputs: the present report which includes, in annex, 29 Country Analytical Fiches and a handbook of practices, the latter aimed at providing examples of good practices for effective selection of operations.

This report, following the ToR and the methodology approved in the Inception Report, provides a synthesis of the analysis of practices, procedures and criteria used for selection of operation, as well as of challenges, good practices and lessons learned. The information was collected, with the support of National Experts, from 29 OPs<sup>1</sup> and for 87 calls, three calls for each OPs. The sample is not statistically representative, also due to the context-specific nature of each call. However, considering the geographical and thematic coverage of the analysis, as well as the fact that it covers different types of selection procedures, the results offer important insights on strengths and weaknesses of actual practices across the EU.

Four main data gathering tools were used:

- First, desk research was carried out to collect information on the implementation of the OPs and selected calls for proposals as detailed in an Excel checklist proposed at the inception phase and agreed with the Commission. The checklist covers elements such as: the profile of the OP, a summary of types of selection procedures and their volumes per TO, a description of how selection criteria are defined and applied etc. Therefore, the checklist is structured along two levels of analysis:
  - a) OP level, focused on programme financial and implementation data and information, and on approval of general selection criteria (i.e. step 1 of the selection of operations; see the Inception Report for an explanation of the nine steps which characterise the process of selection of operations);
  - b) Calls for proposals’ level, which collects information on the following steps of the selection process (i.e. preparation of the initiative, definition of selection criteria, drafting call documents, launch of the call, submission of applications, appraisal of the proposals and selection of projects, information about award decision and complaint management, signature of the contracts).
- Second, questionnaires were circulated among Managing Authorities and IBs to collect additional information necessary to fill in parts of the checklist. These take the form of a validation/contribution to the checklist by MAs/IBs.
- Third, workshops were organised with Managing Authorities/Intermediate Bodies. One workshop for each call for proposal was arranged by the national expert to confirm and refine the flow-chart of selection processes<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the workshops allow to cover information gaps in the checklists. In some cases, in order to increase the responsiveness of the MAs/IBs, the experts conducted separate interviews with the personnel involved in the selection process of the call for proposals instead of the workshops. In some other

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<sup>1</sup> Out of the 30 OPs selected for the analysis, due to the unavailability of Hungarian data.

<sup>2</sup> A visual representation of the selection process of each call for proposal analysed. The flowchart summarises, for each step of the selection process, overall duration, sub-steps, main problems encountered and good practices (see Inception report and its annexes for more information).

cases, some experts organised a unique workshop for all the three calls for proposals since the procedures used in the selection of operations for the three calls for proposals were highly similar and some of the personnel involved were common to more than one of the calls analysed. In this case, the experts made sure to identify the characteristics/problems common to all the calls for proposals as well as the issues and features of each call analysed.

- Fourth, focus group (or surveys with beneficiaries). National experts have been asked to enquire from the MA/IB whether databases of contact details of applicants and/or beneficiaries can be shared with the expert. Depending on the availability of these contact details, the experts jointly with the core team decided whether to organise a small focus group or launch a short survey with beneficiaries. The main role of the focus groups/survey is to collect additional information and specific assessments on several items of the checklist.

Apart from this introductory chapter which summarises the objectives and scope of the assignment, this report is structured in three more sections and three annexes:

- **Section 2 - Different approaches to the selection of operations at the OP Level.** In this chapter we analyse the different approaches of the selected OPs towards calls for proposal as well as how the role of the monitoring committee varies across OPs. To this aim, a set of indicators based on the collected data are used. These include, for examples: the number, types of the selection processes; the number, types, approval of the selection criteria at OP level; the assessment of the effort required for the selection).
- **Section 3 - Selection of operations at call for proposals level.** This chapter summarises the main findings related to the various steps of the call process: 1) Approval of General selection criteria; 2) Preparation of the intervention; 3) Definition of the selection criteria; 4) Drafting call for proposal documents; 5) Launch of the call for proposal; 6) Application submission; 7) Appraisal and selection of the proposals; 8) Information of applicants and complaint management; 9) Contracting. These steps are defined in more detail in the following Table 1.
- **Section 4 - Effective practices in solving the identified problems (based on analytical fiches).** In this last chapter of the present report, we present the main problems faced while selecting the operations (e.g. excessive duration of the steps, excessive number of criteria, gold-plating, excessive administrative burden...) and the good practices in dealing with those. Where possible, the level of transferability of these practices is highlighted. Indeed, in view of the subsequent project Task 2 (handbook of practices for effective selection), we aim at identifying good practices and underlining the conditions for their use and success. The main criteria adopted to identify the good practices are: Quality of the operations (based on the opinions of the programme authorities in terms of ensuring high quality projects and capable to effectively contribute to the achievement of the relevant specific objectives and results); Coverage (examples of good, transferable practices shall cover different themes and types of beneficiaries); Efficiency (procedures which ensure the selection of good projects and are also efficient in terms of administrative costs e.g., those ensuring the most efficient ratio in terms of amount ERDF allocated/time and/or no. of operations/person days); Innovation (examples of innovative selection procedures; particular attention will be given to any innovative approach in the use of e-Cohesion systems and to possible examples of innovative practices emerged during the COVID-19 crisis); Relevance of EU regulations (procedures that effectively comply with EU regulations, and limit, or abolish, gold-plating).
- **Annex:** Additional tables and figures.

**Table 1. Main steps of the selection of operations**

Step of the selection process	Main contents of the step
1. Approval of general selection criteria by MC (if applicable)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the methodology and criteria used for selection of operations shall be approved by Monitoring Committee (<i>this step shall be taken into account if “general” selection criteria are approved by the Monitoring Committee at the beginning</i>)</li> </ul>
2. Preparation of the intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>setting policy objectives and timing for the intervention</li> <li>carrying out a market analysis to appraise demand for support and absorption capacity of the beneficiaries</li> <li>identifying the most appropriate grant award procedure and the date to launch the call for proposal</li> </ul>
3. Definition of the selection criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>defining the eligibility criteria</li> <li>defining the quality and priority criteria</li> <li>approving the selection criteria by the Monitoring Committee (or ensuring their coherence with the criteria previously approved)</li> </ul>
4. Drafting call for proposal documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>drafting the call for proposal documents indicating all thematic, financial and administrative conditions for applicants, operations, selection and award process.</li> <li>validating call for proposal documents with the MA (if applicable)</li> </ul>
5. Launch of the call for proposal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>publishing call for proposal documents according to national rules for publication</li> <li>launching a communication campaign, providing information, Q&amp;A, information sessions to the potential applicants, helpdesk, etc.</li> </ul>
6. Application submission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>collecting applications using IT platform</li> <li>closing the call (if applicable)</li> <li>running administrative compliance check and preparing data necessary for next steps in appraisal process</li> </ul>
7. Appraisal and selection of the proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>establishing the selection committee/panel recruiting internal or external experts, or both, etc. (this process can be organised before – in advance)</li> <li>verifying the eligibility of the applications and taking decision for this stage</li> <li>assessing the applications according to the quality and priority criteria previously defined</li> <li>proposing final ranking</li> </ul>
8. Information of applicants and complaint management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>verifying proposed ranking of applications and taking grant award/refusal (decisions)</li> <li>informing applicants about award decision/rejection of the application</li> <li>managing complaints or legal claims and managing their impact on contact signature (reserve some funding, put (or not) contracting process “on-hold” until complains are assessed, etc.)</li> </ul>
9. Contracting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>preparing granting award decision/grant contract(s)</li> <li>signing the contract(s)</li> <li>publishing results on signed contracts</li> </ul>

## 2. Different approaches to the selection of operations at the OP Level

### Key findings

- **The approaches to selection of operations differ widely between Managing Authorities and across the OPs.** This also applies to the **role of the Monitoring Committee (MC) in approving selection criteria.** The MC approves both general and specific selection criteria in about half of the analysed OPs. Not in all cases, though, are there both general and specific criteria. In some OPs, only general selection criteria exist; in others, only call-specific criteria are defined.
- As regards **general selection criteria**, the **MC intervenes at various levels** (e.g. OP, TO, IP, priority axis level) depending on the programme. In 11 OPs out of 29 in our sample, general selection criteria are only defined at the OP level; in 2 Ops, general criteria are only defined at the TO/IP level; and in 8 Ops, general selection criteria are defined both at the OP and TO/IP levels.
- In the OPs where the MC approves only general selection criteria, specific selection criteria are approved by the MA or sectoral committees etc., depending on the programme.
- Usually, the MC approves the general selection criteria at the beginning of the programming period, while specific criteria are usually approved before a call for proposal is launched.
- **On average, around 186 calendar days (approx. half a year) were needed to approve the general selection criteria after the approval of the OP.** This number varies significantly across the OPs, from cases where the programme approval date coincides roughly with the approval of general selection criteria to other instances in which more than one year from the OP approval had passed before the general criteria were adopted.
- **The number of general criteria** varies significantly across OPs, from a **minimum of 6 to a maximum of 65** in the considered sample.
- **Two thirds of the budget of the sampled OPs is allocated through competitive calls, while one third is allocated by means of non-competitive procedures (direct awards).** Direct award procedures are commonly used for financing technical assistance, regional and local entities and to support public infrastructure development.

### 2.1. Sample overview: covered OPs, funds and thematic objectives

As already mentioned earlier, this report is based on data collected through the checklists on 29 OPs.

The first part of the checklists was aimed at collecting general information on the selected OP, data on the approval of selection criteria (step 1 of the selection process), as well as on OP budgets by TO<sup>3</sup> and type of call.

<sup>3</sup> The Thematic Objectives (TOs) applying to Cohesion policy programmes in 2014-2020, considered in this study, are: TO1 (strengthening research, technological development and innovation), TO2 (enhancing access to, and use and quality of, ICT), TO3 (enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs), TO4 (supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors), TO5 (promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management), TO6 (preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency), TO7 (promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures), TO8 (promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility), TO9 (promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination), TO10 (investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning), TO11 (enhancing

In the present paragraph, which provides an overview of the sample, we use the general information on the selected OPs which includes, inter alia, information on geographical coverage, date of approval of the OP, priority axes and TOs covered, total planned budget, share of ERDF, ESF and CF in OP budget, decided and spent amounts.

The 29 OPs covered in the checklists are listed in the following table which provides information on the type of programme (national, regional or territorial cooperation OP), covered countries, funds, planned budgets and thematic focus (in terms of TOs covered by the OPs).

**Table 2. Sample of OPs covered in the analysis**

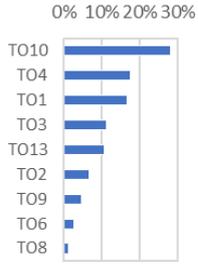
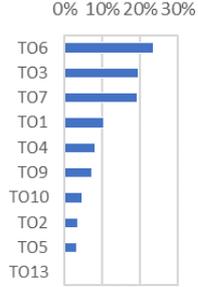
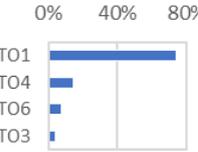
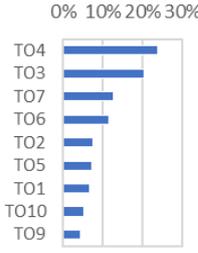
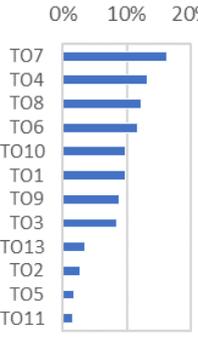
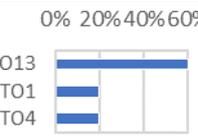
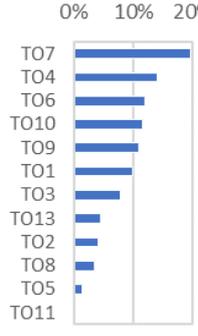
OP	Member States	Type of OP	Fund	OP's planned budget (MEUR)	Thematic focus
<b>Interreg Alpine Space</b>	Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, Switzerland	Interreg	ERDF	140	
<b>Investments in Growth and Employment Austria 2014-2020</b>	Austria	National	ERDF	2,464	
<b>Wallonia ERDF</b>	Belgium	Regional	ERDF	1,765	
<b>Innovation and Competitiveness</b>	Bulgaria	National	ERDF	1,577	
<b>Competitiveness and Sustainable Development</b>	Cyprus	National	ERDF, CF	704	

institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration), TO13 (REACT-EU – Recovery assistance for cohesion and the territories of Europe).

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<b>Environment</b>	Czechia	National	ERDF, CF	3,282	<p>0% 20% 40%</p> <p>T06 T04 T05</p>
<b>Mecklenburg – Vorpommern</b>	Germany	Regional	ERDF	1,210	<p>0% 20% 40%</p> <p>T01 T03 T04 T09 T06</p>
<b>Innovation and Sustainable Growth in Businesses</b>	Denmark	National	ERDF	525	<p>0% 20% 40%</p> <p>T01 T013 T03 T04</p>
<b>Cohesion Policy Funding 2014-2020</b>	Estonia	National	ERDF, ESF, CF	4,878	<p>0% 10% 20%</p> <p>T01 T04 T07 T010 T09 T08 T03 T06 T013 T011 T02 T05</p>
<b>Crete</b>	Greece	Regional	ERDF, ESF	394	<p>0% 10% 20% 30%</p> <p>T09 T06 T03 T07 T010 T04 T02 T01 T05 T08</p>
<b>Andalucía ERDF</b>	Spain	Regional	ERDF	5,316	<p>0% 10% 20% 30%</p> <p>T013 T01 T03 T06 T04 T07 T02 T010 T09 T05</p>
<b>Sustainable Growth and Jobs 2014-2020</b>	Finland	National	ERDF, ESF	2,805	<p>0% 10% 20% 30%</p> <p>T01 T03 T08 T04 T010 T013 T09</p>

TOWARDS SIMPLIFICATION - ANALYSIS OF SELECTION OF OPERATIONS

<p><b>Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur ERDF, ESF 2014-2020</b></p>	<p>France</p>	<p>Regional</p>	<p>ERDF, ESF</p>	<p>969</p>	
<p><b>Competitiveness and Cohesion 2014 - 2021</b></p>	<p>Croatia</p>	<p>National</p>	<p>ERDF, CF</p>	<p>6,863</p>	
<p><b>Border, Midland and Wester Regional</b></p>	<p>Ireland</p>	<p>Regional</p>	<p>ERDF</p>	<p>7,686</p>	
<p><b>Sicily</b></p>	<p>Italy</p>	<p>Regional</p>	<p>ERDF</p>	<p>4,273</p>	
<p><b>EU Structural Funds Investments for 2014-2020</b></p>	<p>Republic of Lithuania</p>	<p>National</p>	<p>ERDF, ESF, CF</p>	<p>8,161</p>	
<p><b>Luxembourg 2014-2020</b></p>	<p>Luxembourg</p>	<p>National</p>	<p>ERDF</p>	<p>118</p>	
<p><b>Growth and employment</b></p>	<p>Latvia</p>	<p>National</p>	<p>ERDF, ESF, CF</p>	<p>5,503</p>	



TOWARDS SIMPLIFICATION - ANALYSIS OF SELECTION OF OPERATIONS

<b>Fostering a competitive and sustainable economy ERDF/CF</b>	Malta	National	ERDF, CF	677	<p>0% 10% 20% 30%</p> <p>T06 T07 T09 T01 T02 T03 T010 T04 T013</p>
<b>ERDF 2014-2020 South Netherlands</b>	Netherlands	Regional	ERDF	402	<p>0% 20% 40% 60%</p> <p>T01 T04 T013</p>
<b>Interreg Belgium (Flanders)-Netherlands</b>	Netherlands, Belgium	Interreg	ERDF	305	<p>0% 20% 40%</p> <p>T01 T04 T06 T08</p>
<b>Mazowieckie Voivodeship 2014-2021</b>	Poland	Regional	ERDF, ESF	2,640	<p>0% 10% 20%</p> <p>T04 T09 T07 T01 T03 T010 T02 T08 T06 T013 T05</p>
<b>NORTE</b>	Portugal	Regional	ERDF, ESF	4,223	<p>0% 10% 20%</p> <p>T03 T010 T06 T09 T08 T01 T04 T02 T011</p>
<b>Integrated Regional Programme</b>	Romania	National	ERDF	8,391	<p>0% 10% 20% 30%</p> <p>T04 T03 T09 T07 T06 T010 T011 T01 T08</p>
<b>Interreg IPA CBC Romania-Serbia</b>	Romania and Serbia	Interreg	ERDF	88	N/A
<b>Investments in Growth and Jobs, Småland and the islands</b>	Sweden	Regional	ERDF	130	<p>0% 20% 40%</p> <p>T03 T01 T04 T02</p>
<b>Quality of Environment</b>	Slovakia	National	ERDF, CF	3,473	<p>0% 20% 40% 60%</p> <p>T06 T04 T05</p>

<b>Implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020</b>	Slovenia	National	ERDF, ESF, CF	4,113	
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Note: Technical Assistance is excluded from the thematic focus  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

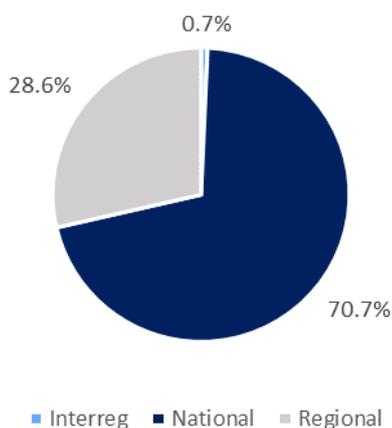
As regards the programme typology, most of the OPs' budget in the sample is represented by national programmes (70.7%) followed by regional (28.64%) and territorial cooperation programmes (0.7%). In our sample, national programmes tend to be on average larger in terms of available resources, while Interreg tend to be much smaller.

The following figure also provides information on the funds of these programmes. Approximately 35.6% of the total planned resources in the sample are from 14 OPs financed only by ERDF. A significant, though lower share (29.9%), is from OPs financed by ERDF, Cohesion Fund and ESF. About 19.8% of the total is related to OP financed by ERDF and CF, approximately 14.6% of the total was planned in OPs financed by ERDF and ESF while 0.1% is related to 1 OP financed by the Instrument of Pre-Accession (IPA).

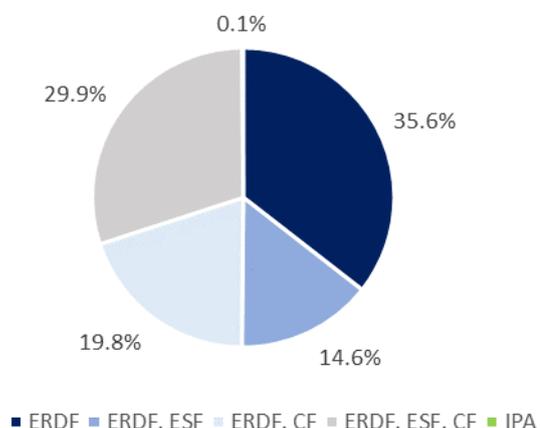
In financial terms, the aggregated budget of the 14 multi-fund OPs represents 64.3% of the sample, indicating that these OPs are on average slightly bigger in terms of resources to be managed with respect to the 14 ERDF OPs. It can be noted that multi-fund OPs tend to cover a slightly larger number of TOs (8) compared to OPs managing only ERDF (6).

**Figure 1. Percentage distribution of OPs' budget in our sample by type of programme and type of fund (N=29)**

*Distribution of OPs' budget by programme type*



*Distribution of OPs' budget by type of fund*

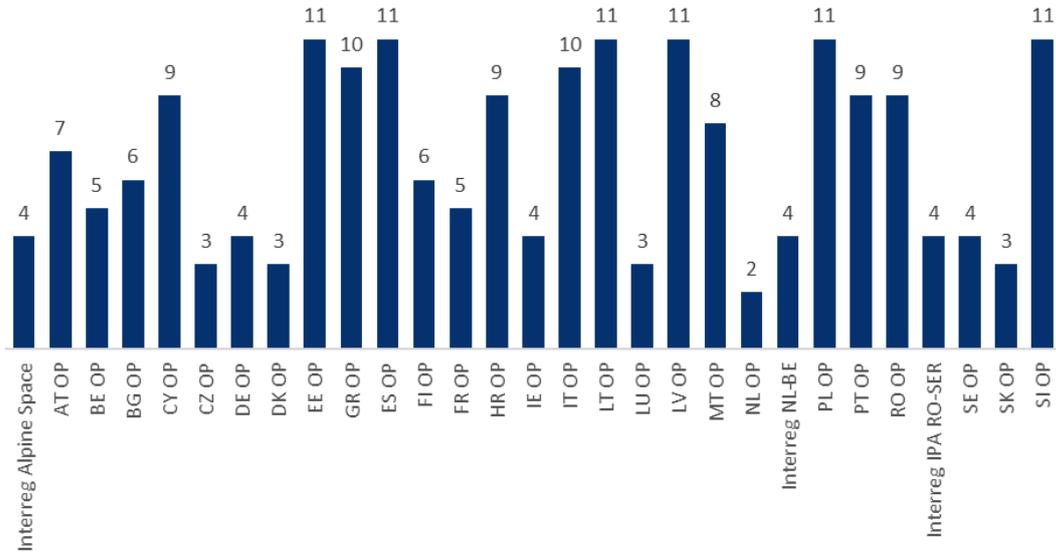


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The thematic focus, intended as the variety of the covered TOs, of the sampled OPs varies significantly from a minimum of 2 in the case of the OP from the Netherlands to a maximum of 11.

On average, no substantial difference has been identified between the national and regional OPs concerning the average number of TOs covered (around 7 in both cases), however Interreg OPs show on average a much lower number of TOs covered (4).

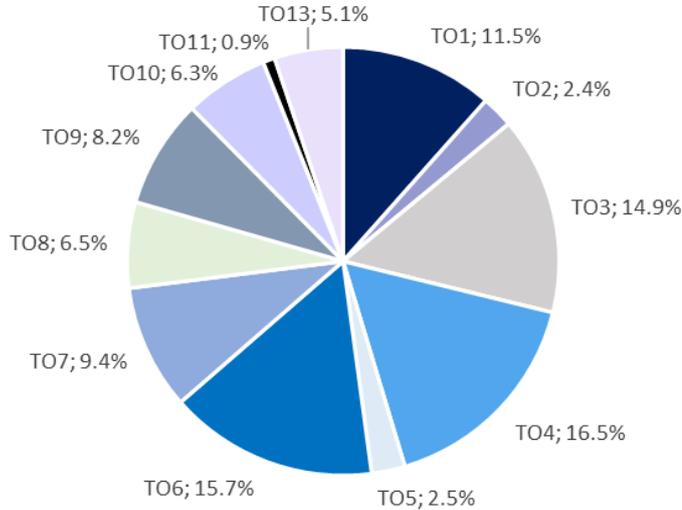
**Figure 2. Number of TOs covered by OP (N=29)**



Note: Technical Assistance is excluded from the analysis.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

TO4, TO6, TO3 and TO1 represent the TOs for which most of the resources were allocated in the OPs in our sample, representing respectively, 16.5%, 15.7%, 14.9% and 11.5% of the total aggregated budget. While only 0.9%, 2.4% and 2.5% of the aggregated resources have been allocated respectively to TO11, TO2 and TO5

**Figure 3. Distribution of the aggregated OPs' budget by TO (N=29)**



Note: Technical Assistance is excluded from the analysis.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

## 2.2. Governance of selection process and role of monitoring committee

As previously mentioned, the first part of the checklists provides information, at the OP level, on approval of selection criteria (step 1 of the selection process). These include details of date of approval of the general selection criteria by the Monitoring Committee (MC), number of general<sup>4</sup> administrative requirements and eligibility criteria<sup>5</sup>, number of general quality criteria<sup>6</sup>, number of general priority criteria<sup>7</sup>, number of changes in the general selection criteria during the period, role of the Monitoring Committee in defining and approving selection criteria for the OP, existence of guidelines for the application and assessment of the general selection criteria.

On average, around 186 days were needed to approve the general selection criteria after the first approval of the OP. This number varies greatly across the OPs, from the cases of the Portuguese and the Romanian OPs for which the approval of the programme coincides roughly with the approval of general criteria, to the cases where 404 days (slightly more than one year) were needed to approve the general criteria after the OP approval.

**Figure 4. Number of days passed between the first approval of the OP and the approval of the general selection criteria (N=18).**



Note: DK, DE, EE, IE have been not included in the figure as they presented large negative values. These may be related to the use of "shadow" MCs to approve the selection criteria before OP's adoption. BE, BG, FI, HR, NL-BE, PL, RO have been not included as the information is not available.

Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

<sup>4</sup> General selection criteria are those that apply to the entire OP, one (or more) Thematic Objective (or Priority Axis) and not only to a specific call. General selection criteria are usually adopted by the Monitoring Committee at the beginning of the programming period; specific selection criteria are those that apply to a specific call, or to a specific action or group of actions.

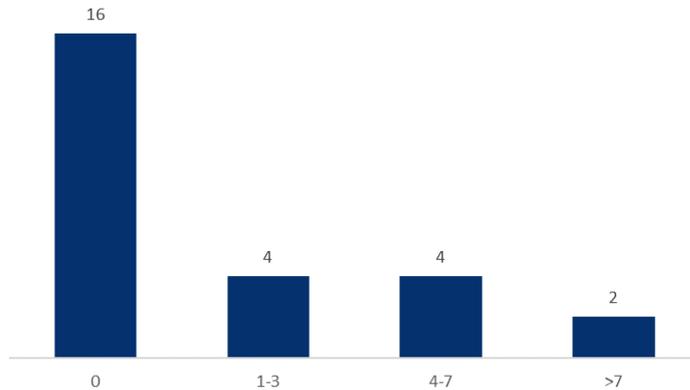
<sup>5</sup> Administrative requirements are used to ensure that the application is complete and responds to the requirements set in the call for proposal. Eligibility criteria define the conditions for the applicants and operations to be eligible for ESIF grant under the respective calls for proposals (or direct grant award). Usually, administrative requirements and eligibility criteria are assessed as "yes/no".

<sup>6</sup> This include also cost criteria. These criteria are used to assess the quality of the application, its contribution to the objectives of the calls for proposals, and its economic convenience. Scoring methods are used to assess quality and cost criteria. The weight on the final score of the two sets of criteria can vary according to rules defined in the call for proposal.

<sup>7</sup> Criteria to assess if the application falls under priority areas identified in the call for proposal. Usually, additional scores are given to applications fulfilling priority criteria. There are two most common types of priority criteria: a) Priority criteria that are incorporated in a scoring system of quality criteria giving a better score for application fulfilling priority criteria; b) Priority criteria that can be used in addition to quality criteria when the choice needs to be made between the applications having the same scores.

After being approved, the general selection criteria can be subject to change in some cases. While for 16 OPs general selection criteria have never been changed, for other OPs criteria have been changed from a minimum of one time in the Lithuanian OP to a maximum of 39 times in the Polish OP.

**Figure 5. Distribution of OPs by the number of changes occurred in the selection criteria (N=26)**

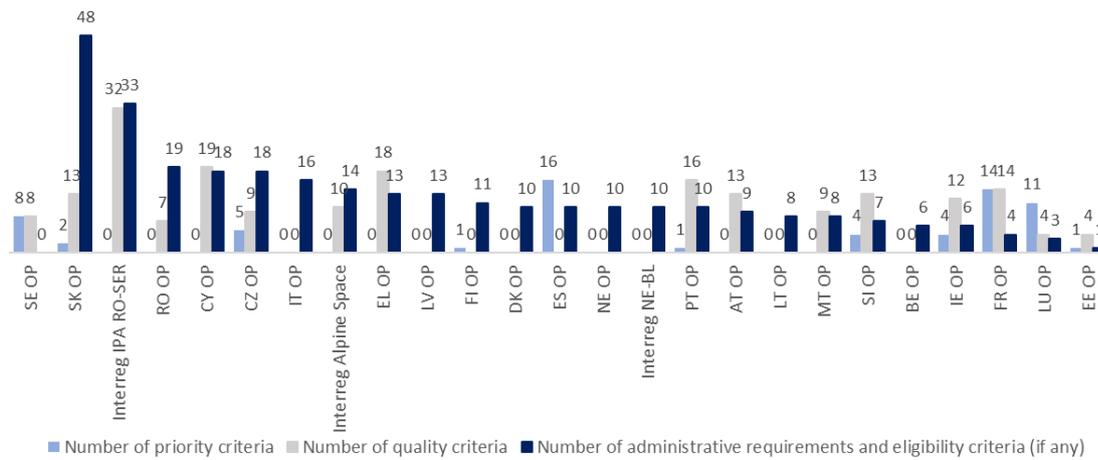


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The distribution of general administrative & eligibility, quality and priority criteria by OP is displayed in the figure below. Overall the IPA Romania-Serbia and the Slovak OP show the highest number of general selection criteria, while the Belgian and Estonian OPs show the lowest number of criteria. The number of general administrative and eligibility criteria is particularly high in some of the analysed OPs such as the Slovak, Lithuanian, Romanian-Serb and Romanian OPs. On the contrary it is much lower in cases such as Estonia, Luxembourg and France OPs. General quality criteria are used in particular by the IPA Romania-Serbia and the Cypriot OP. On the contrary, several OPs have no general quality criteria as they are defined specifically at the call for proposals level. Furthermore, most of the OPs do not foresee general priority criteria, as they are defined directly at the call for proposals level.

In most of the cases where administrative and eligibility criteria are many, this can be linked to the legal context (e.g. fear of fraud, or expecting to receive many appeals may result in the choice of selecting numerous criteria). These situations can signal a potential risk of gold plating.

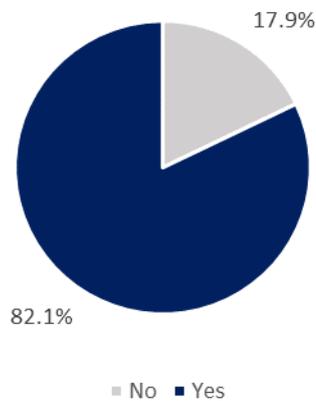
**Figure 6. Number of general selection criteria (administrative & eligibility, quality and priority)<sup>8</sup> (N=26)**



Note: OPs from: DE, BG, HR and PL no included in the analysis due to data unavailability.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The vast majority of the OPs in our sample (82.1%) provide guidelines on how to apply and assess general selection criteria, while only for a limited number of OPs guidelines are not provided. For example, in the case of the Italian OP guidelines are not provided. The lack of a standardised methodology may lead to some confusion in the application of criteria.

**Figure 7. Percentage distribution of OPs by the presence of guidelines on how to assess the general selection criteria (N=29)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

<sup>8</sup> General and specific selection criteria can be than divided into:

- Administrative requirements and eligibility criteria. Administrative requirements are used to ensure that an application is complete and responds to legal requirements. Eligibility criteria define the conditions for an applicant and an operation to be eligible for ESIF grants under the respective call for proposal (or direct grant award). Usually, the fulfilment of administrative requirements and eligibility criteria is as “yes/no”;
- Quality criteria. These include also cost criteria. Such criteria are used to assess the quality of the application, its contribution to the objectives of the call for proposal and its economic convenience. Scoring methods are used to assess quality and cost criteria. The weight on the final score of the two sets of criteria can vary according to rules defined in the call for proposal;
- Priority criteria. Criteria to assess if application falls under priority areas identified in the call for proposal. Usually, additional scores are given to applications fulfilling priority criteria. There are two most common types of priority criteria:
  - Priority criteria that are incorporated in a scoring system of quality criteria, which give a better score for application fulfilling such priority criteria;
  - Priority criteria that can be used in addition to quality criteria when it is necessary to make a choice between applications with the same quality score.

The following synoptic table provides a snapshot of the role of Monitoring Committee in defining and approving selection criteria in the OPs covered in the analysis.

In 15 out of 29 OPs, the MC approves both general and call specific selection criteria. Usually, the MC approves the general selection criteria at the beginning of the programming period at the OP level and in some cases also at the investment priority level as in the case of seven OPs in our sample (CY, CZ, DE, ES, FR, HR, SI). Call specific criteria are defined and approved either at the beginning of the programming period as for example in the Italian and Belgian OPs, or each time a new call is launched as in the German and Polish OPs. The approval of modification of the general criteria throughout the programming period is always of competence of the MC, while on the approval of the modification of call specific selection criteria the competence is mixed: sometimes it is shared across MAs/IBs and the MC, sometimes it is a competence of the MC, while in other cases the MC can just give an opinion but does not formally approve them. Overall, it can be highlighted that the Monitoring Committee is not simply a “registration chamber”, it is prepared to review and approve the selection criteria and procedures. In one case (Estonian OP), it can be noted that the Monitoring Committee has a more operational role in the preparation of the calls: it is structured along the OP’s sectors of intervention, and sectorial committees propose new criteria for the specific call they work on.

**Table 3. Role of monitoring Committee in defining and approving selection criteria**

Country of OP	Role of the Monitoring Committee in defining and approving selection criteria for OP
Alpine Space	Selection procedure is standardised across calls. At the beginning of the programming period the <b>MC approves the selection criteria to be applied to each call for proposals clearly distinguish between quality and eligibility criteria</b> . Whenever a call for proposals is launched the MC approves all the updated calls for proposals' documents. Selection criteria have been modified 3 times and are subject to the approval of the MC.
Austria	At the beginning of the programming period the <b>MC approves the general selection criteria to be applied at the OP level</b> . The IB can then tailor certain aspects of the criteria to the thematic focus of the call. MC does not approve call specific selection criteria. General selection criteria have been modified 5 times and are subject to the approval of the MC.
Belgium	At the beginning of the programming period the <b>MC approves the specific selection criteria to be applied to each call for proposals</b> .
Bulgaria	At the beginning of the programming period the <b>MC approves the specific selection criteria to be applied to each call for proposals</b> . No general selection criteria exist.
Cyprus	The <b>MC approves general selection criteria at the OP and investment priority level</b> at the beginning of the programming period. Each time a new call is launched the MC <b>validates the call specific selection criteria</b> . General selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Czechia	The MC approves the <b>general selection criteria for the entire OP and per investment priority</b> of the OP at the beginning of the programming period. Subsequently, the MC agreed <b>on specific selection criteria for all calls for proposals within the priority axes</b> . General selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Germany	The MC approves the <b>general selection criteria per investment priority</b> of the OP at the beginning of the programming period. Call specific criteria are developed by the MA. Each time a <b>call is launched call-specific selection criteria are approved by the MC</b> . General selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Denmark	The MC approves <b>the methodology and criteria for the general selection of operations</b> . The <b>MC also provides feedback on the documents</b> that are prepared by the MA <b>for each call for proposals</b> . These documents also include internal guidelines on the evaluation and selection of operations for the selection committee. General selection criteria have never been changed during the programming period.
Estonia	At the beginning of the period, the <b>MC only approves the general selection criteria at the OP level</b> . MC then appoints sectoral committees who give an opinion on the support activities and project selection criteria and procedures related to their sector's call for proposals. General selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Greece	At the beginning of the programming period the <b>MC approves both the general criteria at the OP level and call specific criteria</b> . General selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period, while call specific criteria have been changed several times. Whenever call specific criteria are modified prior to the launch of a new call the MC has to approve the revised/new criteria.
Spain	At the beginning of the programming period the <b>MC approves the methodology and criteria for general criteria at level of the OP and Priority Axes</b> . General selection criteria have been modified 13 times during the programming period.
Finland	At the beginning of the programming period the <b>MC approves the methodology and criteria for both general criteria at the OP level and specific criteria</b> . The regional councils can add specific regional criteria to individual calls, but this option is rarely used as the regional councils are in most cases satisfied with the criteria accepted by the Monitoring Committee. General selection criteria have been never modified during the programming period.
France	At the beginning of the programming period the <b>MC approves the general criteria for both the OP and priority axis level</b> . General selection criteria have been modified 3 times during the programming period.



TOWARDS SIMPLIFICATION - ANALYSIS OF SELECTION OF OPERATIONS

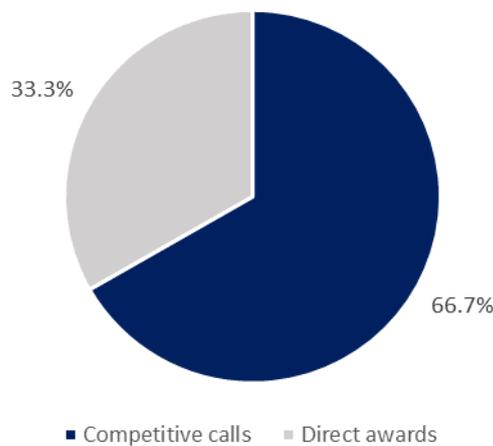
Croatia	At the beginning of the programming period the <b>MC approves the general criteria at the TO level</b> . Call specific selection criteria are approved by the MA.
Ireland	At the beginning of the programming period the <b>MC approves the general criteria at the OP and Priority Axes Level</b> . General selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Italy	At the beginning of the programming period, the <b>MC approves the general criteria at the OP level as well as call specific criteria</b> . General selection criteria have never been modified while call specific criteria have been modified 7 times during the programming period.
Latvia	At the beginning of the programming period, 9 thematic subcommittees corresponding to the priority axis included in OP are created in order to discuss and review general selection criteria, the methodology for applying such criteria and the initial assessment reports drafted by the MA. <b>The Monitoring committee then finally approves the general selection criteria at the Priority Axes level</b> . Call specific criteria are defined directly by the authority in charge of the specific selection process. Overall, the general selection criteria and the methodology were revised 4 times during the programming period.
Republic of Lithuania	At the beginning of the programming period, the <b>MC approves the general selection criteria at the OP level</b> . Furthermore, <b>call-specific selection criteria</b> are defined by the line ministries, discussed with the public and <b>approved by the MC for each call</b> . General selection criteria have never been modified while call specific criteria have been modified 7 times during the programming period. The selection criteria have been modified once during the programming period.
Luxembourg	At the beginning of the programming period, the <b>MC approves the general criteria at the OP and Priority axes level as well as call specific criteria</b> . The selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Malta	At the beginning of the programming period, the <b>MC approves the general criteria at the OP level</b> . The selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Netherlands	At the beginning of the programming period <b>assessment framework is established by the Monitoring Committee</b> . There are no call specific selection criteria. Before an individual call for proposals is launched, the Monitoring Committee reviews and approves the call for proposal documents. General selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Netherlands, Belgium	At the beginning of the programming period, the <b>MC approves the general criteria at the OP level</b> . General selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period. The MC approves also the call for proposals documents.
Poland	At the beginning of the programming period the <b>Monitoring Committee approves the general selection criteria</b> . The MC also intervenes in the approval of the call specific selection criteria prior to the launch of each call. Selection criteria have been modified 39 times during the programming period.
Portugal	At the beginning of the programming period, the <b>MC approves the general selection criteria at the OP and Priority Axes level</b> . Furthermore, it approves the call specific selection criteria for each call. The selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Romania	At the beginning of the programming period, the <b>MC approves the general selection criteria at the OP level</b> . Furthermore, it approves the call specific selection criteria for each call. The selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Romania and Serbia	At the beginning of the programming period, the <b>MC approves the general criteria at the OP level and call specific criteria</b> . The selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Sweden	The <b>MC approves general criteria for all regional fund programs in Sweden</b> . Further criteria are added to these mandatory criteria by the regional authorities' unit for regional development and growth and approved by the MC. Beside this also guiding principles for the selection of operations are drafted. Selection criteria have never been modified during the programming period.
Slovakia	At the beginning of the programming period, the <b>MC approves general criteria at the level of the OP and the Priority Axes</b> . The selection criteria have been modified 4 times during the programming period.
Slovenia	At the beginning of the programming period, the <b>MC approves general criteria both at the OP and TO level</b> . The selection criteria have been modified 3 times during the programming period.

## 2.3. Types of calls used across TOs and programmes

At the OP level, as previously highlighted, the checklists provide information also on the budgets by type of call and TO. Such data make it possible to distinguish among competitive calls and direct awards. However, it must be noted that these data have been particularly difficult to retrieve for the national experts who, in some cases, had to rely solely on MA's estimations.

Most of the budget of the mapped OPs is allocated through competitive calls (66.7% of the total), while 33.3% of the OPs' budget is allocated by means of direct award procedures.

**Figure 8. Distribution of the aggregated OPs' budget by type of call (competitive calls vs direct awards)**

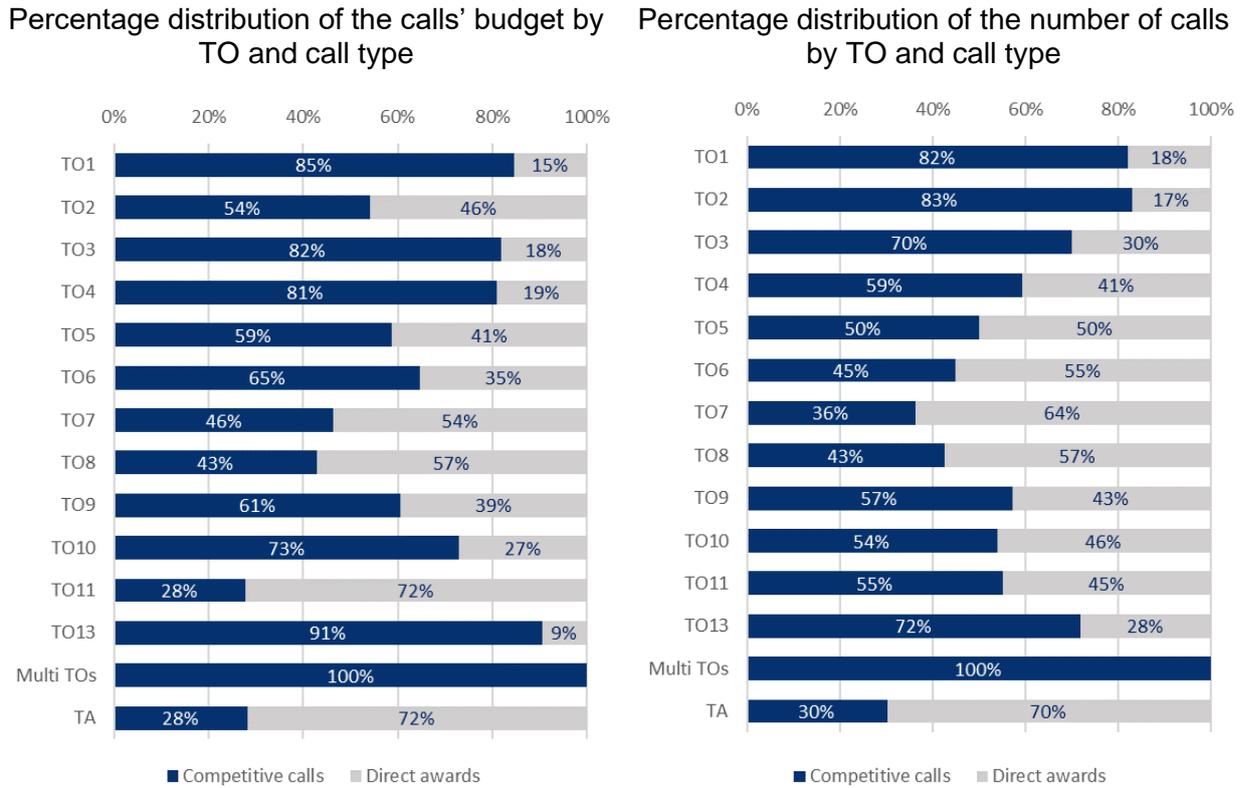


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The distribution of the total number of calls and of their budgets by TO and type of call across our sample is shown in the following graphs. The graphs include a category called multi TOs as in some cases, it was not possible to breakdown calls by single TO. Overall, mostly competitive calls are used across most TOs, with the exception of Technical Assistance where the highest percentage of calls and funds (around 72%) is allocated through direct award procedures. The share of direct awards is also high in the case of TO7, TO8 and TO11.

In relation to TO2, there is a prevalence of competitive calls in the total number of calls but, if the budget is considered, the importance of competitive calls decreases. This may indicate that a large number of competitive calls with small budget and a small number of direct award procedures with a larger budget have been launched.

**Figure 9. Percentage distribution of the number of calls and calls' budget by TO and call type (N=29)**

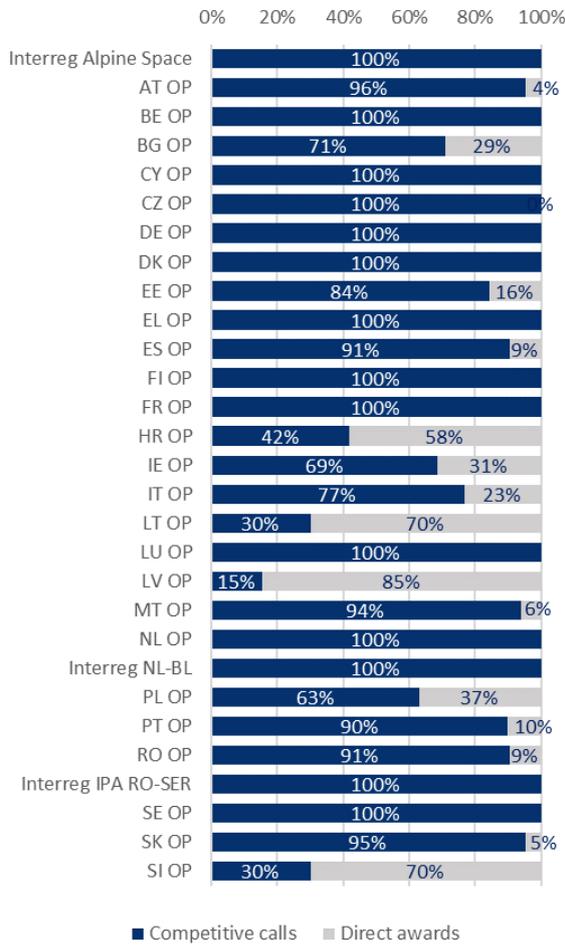


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

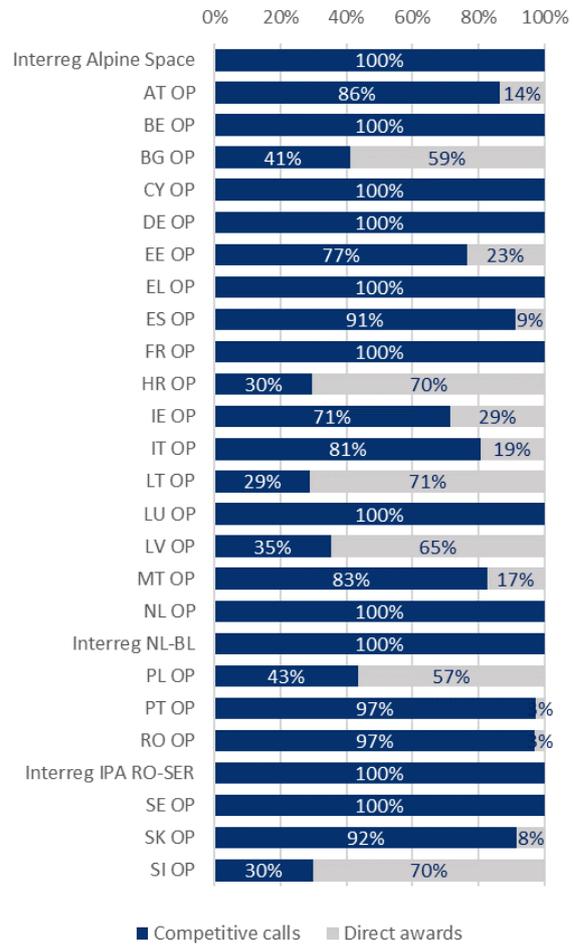
By looking at the distribution of calls and their budgets by OP and call type, it can be observed that the programmes mostly use competitive procedures and, in some OPs, these are the only procedures. This is the case, for example, of the German, Finnish and Belgian OPs, as well as the Interreg programmes which launched only competitive calls, regardless of the TO. On the other hand, there are some OPs for which the use of direct award procedure is prevalent. This happens, for example, in Croatia, Lithuania, Latvia and Slovenia, which are all national OPs. In most of these cases, the direct award procedures were mainly used for financing regional and local entities, as well as infrastructures, the improvement of administrative capacity and public service delivery, water management and environmental protection projects.

**Figure 10. Percentage distribution of the number of calls and calls' budget by OP and call type (N=29)**

**Percentage distribution of the calls' budget by OP and call type**



**Percentage distribution of the number of calls by OP and call type**



Note: OPs from: Czechia (CZ), Denmark (DK) and Finland (FI) are excluded from the analysis on the number of calls due to data unavailability.

Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### 3. Selection of operations at call for proposals level

#### 3.1. Overview of the selection process

##### Key findings

- A **sub-sample of 87 calls**, to be analysed in detail, was extracted from the initial sample of 29 OPs (i.e. 3 calls per programme). The total worth of these calls is EUR 4,270,874,332 (around **1% of total ERDF and CF resources**).
- Although this sample is **not statistically representative**, the results do **offer important insights into the strengths and weaknesses** of actual practices across the EU when considering the geographical and thematic coverage of the analysis and the fact that it covers different selection procedures.
- The **average effort required for selecting operations**, namely the Full-Time Equivalent days (FTE days) from the launch of the call for proposals until the signature of the last contract, is **373 FTE days** for the OPs covered in the analysis.
- The **appraisal** of the proposals is the **most burdensome step** of the process, in terms of FTE days, as, on average, it accounts for 46.6% of the total effort (195 FTE days), followed by the step of **contract preparation & signature**, which represents 26.2% of the effort (110 FTE days).
- In terms of calendar days spent in selecting operations, there is a considerable variety across OPs and types of calls. As expected, for competitive calls, the selection process lasts more than twice the average length of a direct award (and, in terms of effort, is more than twice as demanding).
- On average, for the whole sample, nearly two years (652 calendar days) were covered from the **launch of the call until the end of the appraisal of proposals**. However, in our sample, this ranges **from less than 200 to more than 1600 calendar days**.

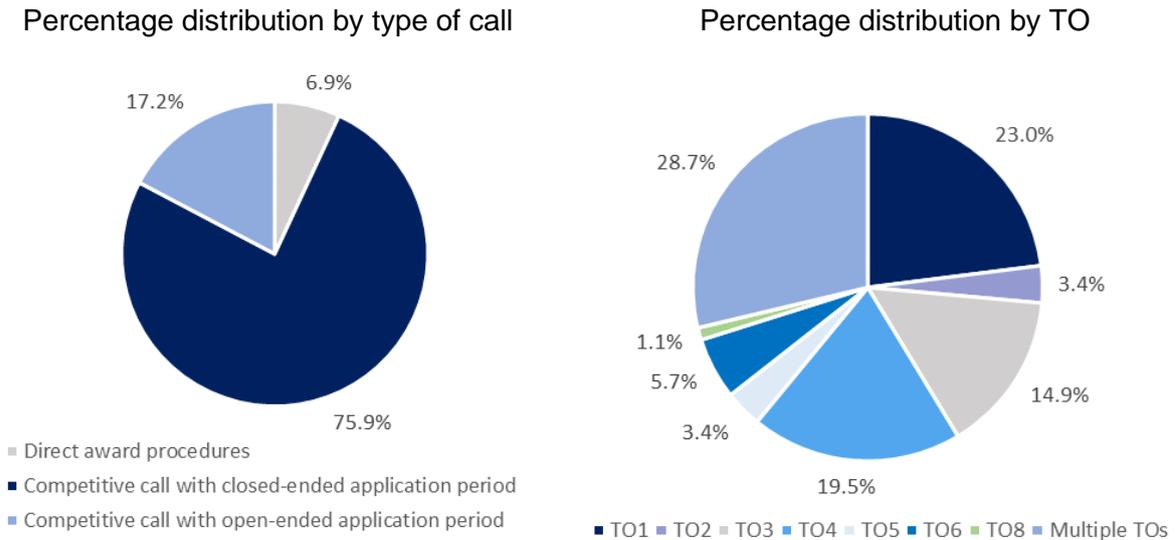
The compiled checklists include information on 87 calls<sup>9</sup> funded through ERDF (94.3%) and CF (5.7%).<sup>10</sup> About 75.9% of them are competitive calls with a closed-ended application period. 17.2% of the total is made of open-ended competitive calls while direct award procedures represent only 6.9% of the total.

The sample of OPs covered in the analysis was designed to provide a balanced representation of the different thematic objectives. Nonetheless, most of the analysed calls are related to multiple TOs (28.7%), TO1 (23%), TO4 (19.5%) and TO3 (14.9%), which reflects the need to focus on particularly relevant policy areas, where beneficiaries are less prone to administrative complexities. These include, for example, R&D, SME support and energy efficiency.

<sup>9</sup> As already mentioned in the introduction, data on a Hungarian OP initially selected are not available. Therefore the sample of OPs includes 29 programmes out of the 30 initially envisaged. Considering that three calls per OP were selected for the analysis, this report covers a total of 87 calls.

<sup>10</sup> Due to the low responsiveness of the Hungarian OP, data on the CFP of the Hungarian OP are not considered in the analysis.

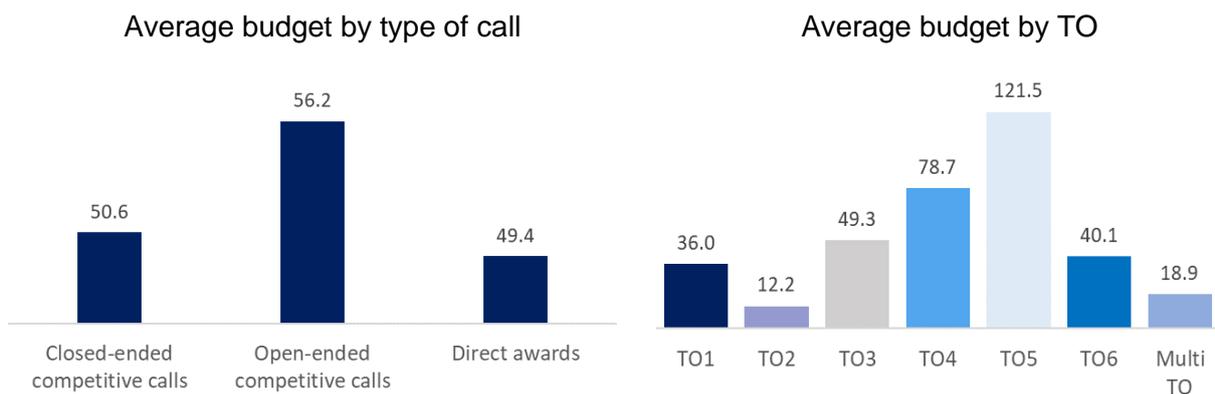
**Figure 11. Percentage distribution of sampled calls by type and TO (N=87)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The total amount allocated to the calls in our sample is 3,602 MEUR, which represents around 1% of the total ERDF and CF resources. On average, competitive open-ended calls show the highest budget per call (56.2 MEUR) followed by direct award procedures (49.4 MEUR) and closed-ended competitive calls (50.6 MEUR). In some cases, open-ended competitive calls cover the entire budget of a TO, and in some programmes they are the only type of call used (e.g. Alpine Space OP). Direct award show on average a relevant budget per call probably due to the fact that these procedures are typically used to finance large infrastructure projects. On average, TO5, TO4 and TO3 shows the highest budget per call.

**Figure 12. Average call budget type of call and TO, MEUR (N=83)**

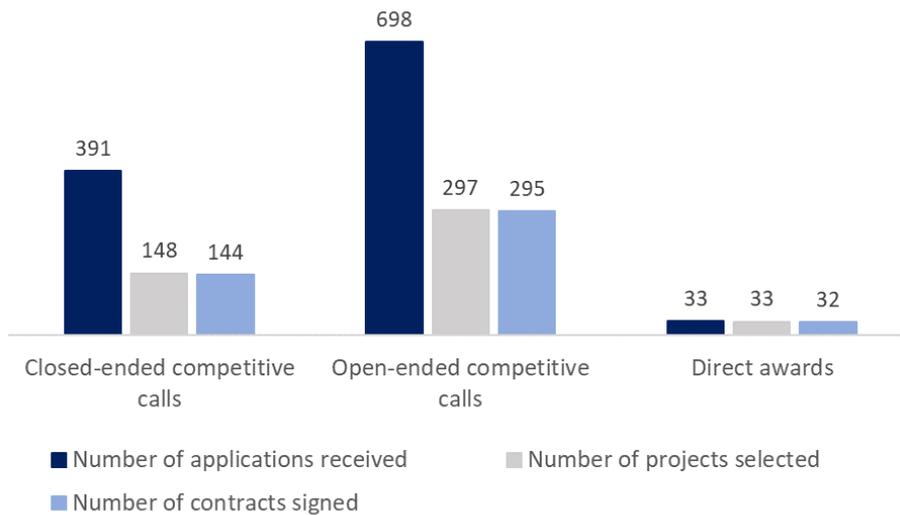


Note: Data are in MEUR. TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Some descriptive statistics on the number of applications received, projects selected and contract signed in relation to the sampled calls are presented in the following figures. The number of applications received is highest for open-ended competitive calls (698 on average), while it is considerably smaller for closed-ended calls (391) and direct award procedures (33). Open-ended calls show also the highest number of applications received. This is mainly driven by one of the Spanish call for which a large number of applications were received (a much larger number than

the other open-ended calls). When this call is not considered the situation changes: closed-ended competitive calls become, on average, the calls for which most applications, on average, have been received as well as the calls with the highest rejection rate. This latest feature could be explained by the fact that while in the case of open-ended calls applications are evaluated on a rolling basis, mainly based on eligibility criteria, and the call is closed as soon as the financial resources are exhausted, closed-ended calls receive a large number of applications in a pre-set submission windows and evaluation is based mainly on quality criteria. For direct awards, no project has been rejected and the number of contracts signed is slightly lower than the number of selected projects. This can be explained by voluntary withdrawal of some of the selected projects.

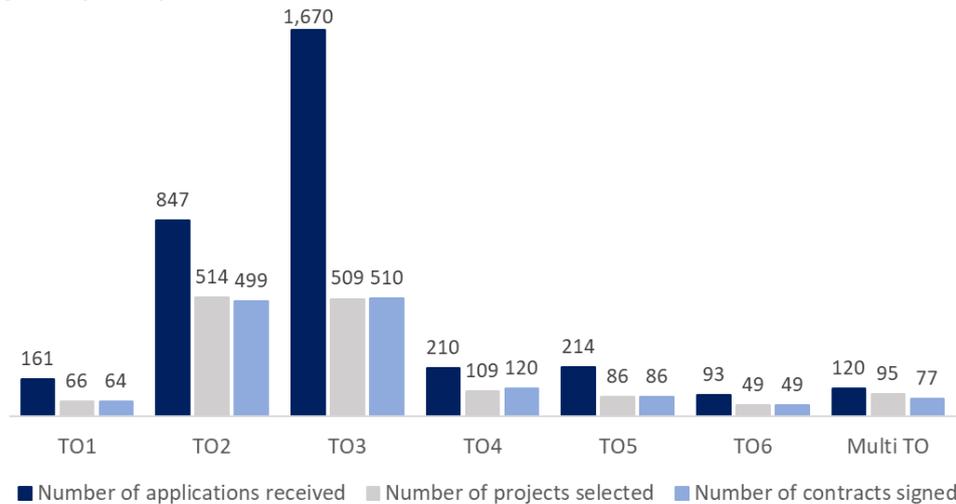
**Figure 13. Average number of applications received, projects selected and contract signed by type of call (N=83)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

In our sample of calls, the TOs characterised by the highest number of applications are TO3 and TO2. While, on average, TO6 and TO1 show the lowest number of applications received.

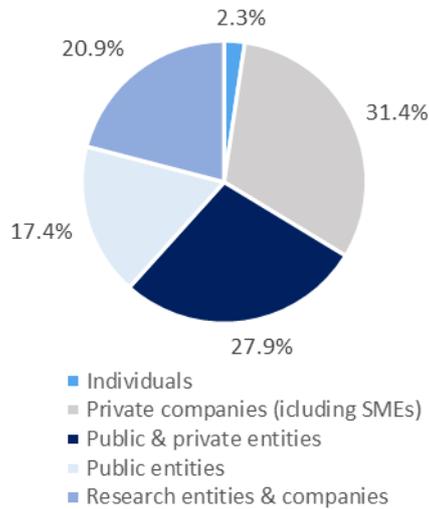
**Figure 14. Average number of applications received, projects selected and contract signed by TO (N=82)**



Note: TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The compiled checklists also include information on the type of beneficiaries targeted by the calls. The beneficiaries have been grouped in five categories: individuals, public entities, private companies (including SMEs), research organisations, public & private networks. Individuals were targeted only by two calls launched under TO3 and addressed to entrepreneurs. Most of the calls targeted private companies (including SMEs) and public & private networks. Research organisations were targeted by 20.9% of the calls and were mostly in the context of TO1, while calls launched under TO4 and TO5 were mostly targeting public entities.

**Figure 15. Distribution of calls by the type or targeted beneficiaries (N=87)**

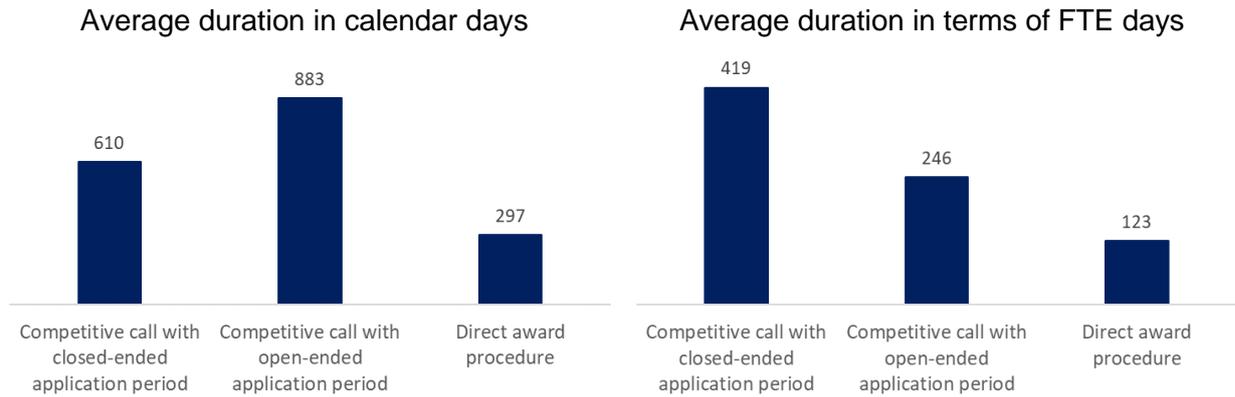


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The following graph provides an overview of the average duration of the selection process, in terms of calendar days, from the launch of the call for proposals till the signature of the last contract. On average, open-ended competitive calls last two calendar years and a half (883 days), closed-ended competitive calls around one and a half years (610 days) and direct award slightly less than one year (297). The longer duration of the open-ended competitive calls is related to the characteristics of this type of calls. Indeed, closed-ended calls are open for submission of applications for a limited pre-defined period of time; applications are evaluated all together after the submission deadline, and contracts are also signed all together after the evaluation is concluded. Differently, open-ended competitive calls remain open for submission of application till the exhaustion of the call budget, while applications are evaluated and contract are signed on a rolling basis. Open-ended competitive calls tend to focus mostly on eligibility criteria rather than quality and priority criteria, and hence appear on average less complex than closed-ended competitive calls. This explains why, despite open-ended competitive calls have a higher duration of the selection process in terms of calendar days, they still have a lower duration in terms of FTE days compared to closed-ended competitive calls. Direct award procedures, which have to deal with a much lower number of applications, show on average the lowest duration both in terms of calendar days and FTE days.



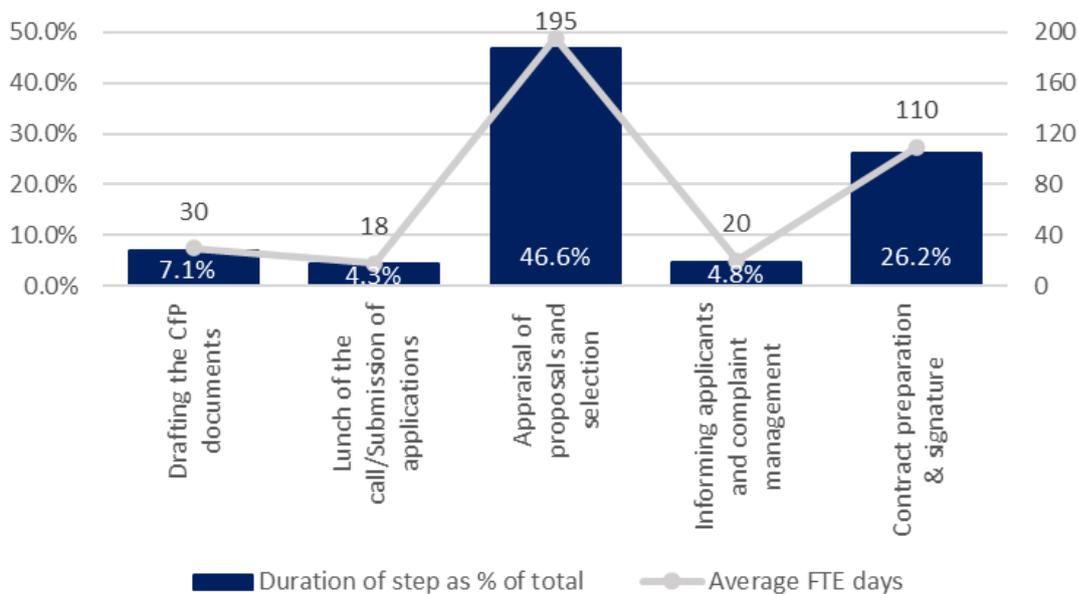
**Figure 16. Average duration of the selection process by type of call**



Note: The duration in calendar days of the selection process (left hand graph) is computed as the difference between the end of step 9 and the start date of step 5. For both graphs, step 2 and 3 have not been considered as are usually carried out at the beginning of the programming period and very few observations on the dates have been reported. Step 4 has not been considered as no data on dates were available for direct award procedures.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The figure below shows the average duration in terms of FTE days of each step of the selection process, from the drafting of the call for proposals documents to the signature of the last contract. The appraisal and selection of the proposals is the most burdensome step in terms of FTE days, and on average it accounts for 46.6% of the effort, followed by the step of contract preparation & signature which represents 26.2% of the process, and by the step of drafting the call for proposals documents (7.1%). This trend is confirmed also if competitive calls are divided between open and closed-ended (See figures A. 1 and A. 2 in Annex I). The situation slightly changes for direct awards. Indeed, when we consider FTE instead of calendar days, the importance, in terms of effort, of the step of informing applicants grows significantly because several discussions between authorities and applicants usually take place to finalise the projects in this phase and during the contracting phase (See figure A. 3 in Annex I).

**Figure 17. Average FTE days needed to carry out the selection process for the overall sample**



Note: Step 2 and 3 have not been considered as are usually carried out at the beginning of the programming period and data on FTE days for these steps are not included in our checklist.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

## 3.2. Selecting the operations, step by step

### 3.2.1. Preparation of the intervention (step 2)

#### Key findings

- During the **preparation of the intervention**, a **needs analysis or market research was conducted in 75%** of the calls for which information was available. 25% did not use needs analysis or market research but relied on recent experience from past calls and analysis of the progress of existing initiatives.
- For needs and market analysis, the **most common practice** is to resort to various **partners and stakeholders**, rely on inter-institutional and public **consultations**, and other means such as workshops etc.

The policy objectives are set and the timing for the intervention is defined during this step of the selection process. This step includes carrying out market analysis to appraise demand for support and absorption capacity of the beneficiaries, and identifying the most appropriate grant award procedure. The data on this step gathered through the checklists are listed in the following table.

**Table 4. List of data collected for step 2**

Variable	Unit of measurement
2.1 Did MA and/or IB undertake needs analysis or market research for preparing the call for proposal?	Yes/no
2.2 Main methods used for needs analysis and market research	Multiple choice (multiple selections possible)
2.3 Number of days it took to implement the needs analysis or market research	Number of days
2.4 Main types of stakeholders involved in the preparation of the intervention	Multiple choice (multiple selections possible)
2.5 To what extent did the preparation of the intervention build on preparation activities of previous interventions?	Likert scale 1 -5
2.6 Extent to which beneficiaries and applicants agree that the call for proposal was aligned to their needs	Likert scale 1 -5
2.7 Existence of an implementation plan and initially planned deadlines of this selection process	Yes/no

In addition to the above variables, a number of indicators were calculated, wherever appropriate, to identify similarities and difference among practices.

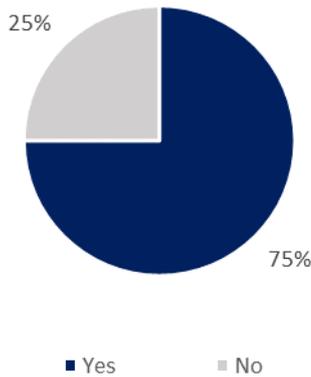
#### Needs assessment and market research

An analysis of needs or market research was carried out in 75% of the calls for which information on this aspect is available. As shown in the right-hand graph in the following figure, exchange and dialogue with socio-economic partners and academia, and inter-institutional consultations, were the most popular tools that have been used for preparing the intervention, while actual market research was less popular. In several cases (23 calls), other types of methods have been used by the MA/IBs to carry out the analysis for the preparation of the interventions. These include, for example, needs and gap analysis, exchanges with other administrations, analysis of progress of existing initiatives. In 11 calls, desk-based needs analysis has been implemented, while in 7 calls experiences from past calls has contributed to the needs assessment. In five calls, exchanges and workshops with other administrations (such as different ministries or the MC) have been organised to assess the needs.

It should be noted that, sometimes, the Managing Authorities highlighted that the preparation activities such as an assessment of needs were not carried out specifically for individual calls but as part of the preparation of the operational programme as a whole.

**Figure 18. Distribution of the calls according to the fact that a market/need analysis was carried out and main methods used to carry out these analyses**

Percentage of calls designed with or without a needs/market analysis (N = 80)



Number of calls by main methods used for needs analysis and market research (N = 73)

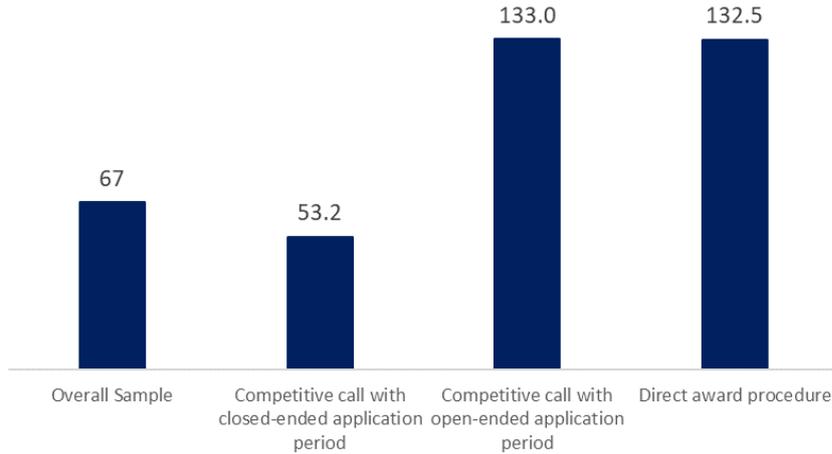


Note: In the left-hand graph: "Yes" = number of calls for which needs/market analyses have been carried out just before the launch of the call; "No" = number of calls for which needs/market analyses have not been carried out.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Number of days needed

As mentioned earlier, MAs pointed out that the analysis for preparing the calls are often done when the OP is set out. Therefore, we could collect information on the number of days required for preparation activities only for around 60% of calls in our sample. On average, preparation activities lasted for 67 days. The most of time needed to run the preparation phase is observed for calls launched under open-ended competitive procedures (133) followed by direct award procedures (132.5) and closed-ended procedures (53.2). It is important to note that data on the number of days needed to prepare the intervention are based on estimation on MA/IBs and therefore it might be particularly challenging to draw conclusion on these results. Nonetheless, it can be observed, that in 11 of the 12 calls where the preparation processes lasted longer than 100 days, the targeted beneficiaries were some sort of public authorities (municipalities, regions, ministries or agencies in charge of public infrastructure projects). This indicates that in calls targeting public authorities, a more intensive preparation process was required. Furthermore, the calls for which needs/market analysis were carried out are those characterised by the highest number of days to prepare the intervention while, on the contrary, in calls without a specific needs/market analysis this step lasts significantly less.

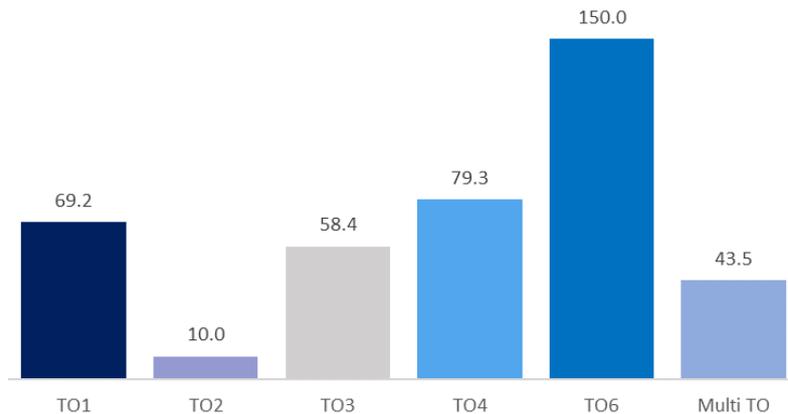
**Figure 19. Average number of days needed to prepare the intervention by call type (N=52)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Drawing conclusions on the number of days needed to prepare the intervention by TO is a challenge due to the low number of observations collected on this aspect which makes the subsample very small. Nonetheless, it seems that, on average, a higher number of days is needed to prepare calls under TO6 and TO4, which could reflect complexity of projects financed under these objectives.

**Figure 20. Average number of days needed to prepare the intervention by TO (N=50)**

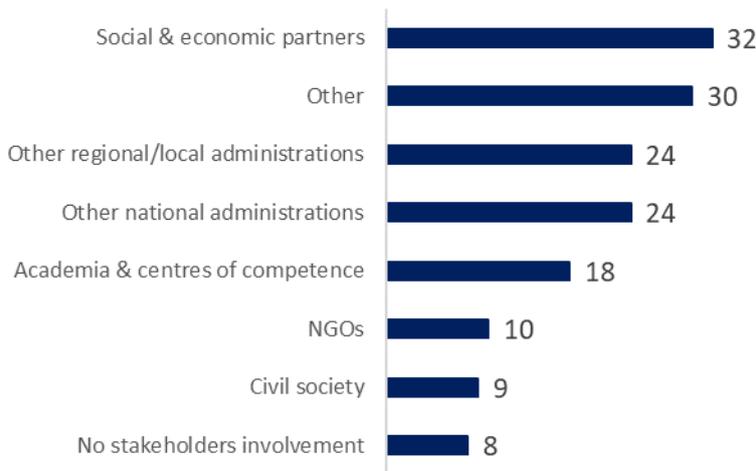


Note: TO8 and TO5 have been excluded from this analysis as they included information for only one call.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Types of stakeholders involved

MAs provided information on the types of stakeholders that were involved in the preparation process for 88% of the calls in our sample. Figure 21 shows the distribution of calls by type of stakeholder involved. Social & economic partners and “other” stakeholders were the most mentioned categories. This last category includes: inter-ministerial working groups (8), local associations representing private sector (7), pre-selected candidates and beneficiaries (4). Other public authorities such as regional/local and other national administrations were also often involved in the preparation of calls.

**Figure 21. Number of calls by the type of stakeholders involved during the preparation of the intervention (N=77)**

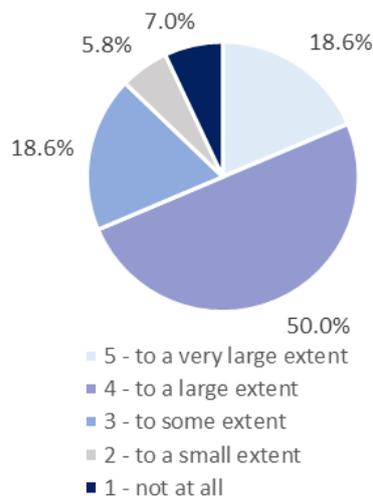


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Extent to which preparation built on previous period**

It has been asked to MA to assess, on a scale from 1 to 5, the extent to which the preparation of the intervention built on previous interventions. Overall, the 66.6% of the calls for which we have this information were largely or very largely based on previous interventions, signalling that similar previously launched calls are important for the preparation of subsequent initiatives. Only the 7% of the calls in our sample did not refer at all on similar activities previously carried. This was due to the fact that the MA/IB did not implement any similar intervention prior to the launch of call.

**Figure 22. Extent to which preparation of calls relied on previous interventions, overall sample (N=86)<sup>11</sup>**



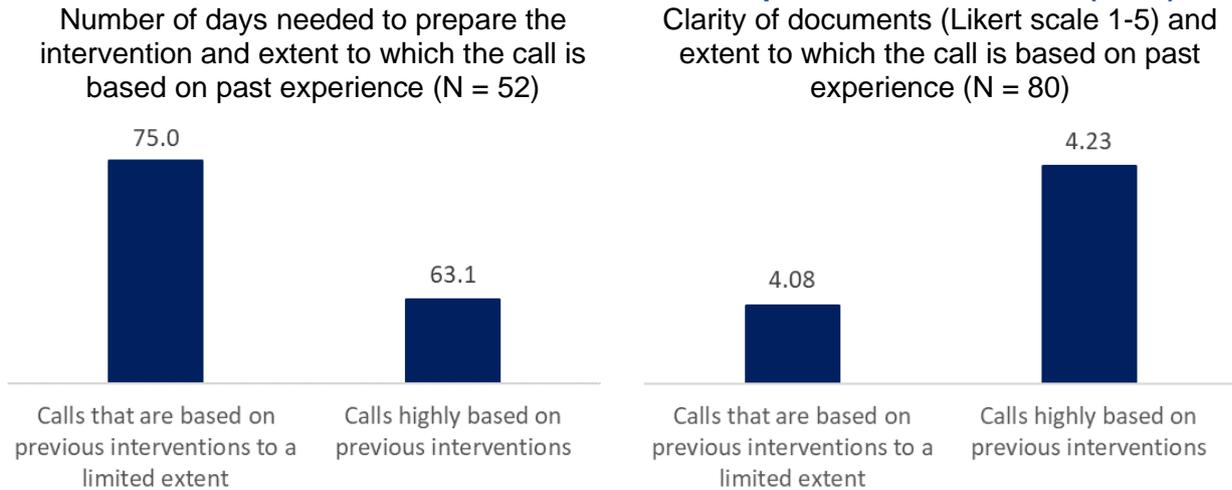
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

<sup>11</sup> Note on methodology: national experts were asked to provide their assessment to the extent to which the call is based on similar past experiences. In calls that targeted new interventions, this should be not at all or to a small extent based on previous interventions, in calls that are based on similar past experience and incorporates the lessons learned, this should be judged to be to some or to a large extent based on previous experiences. Calls that are repeating previous calls should be assessed to be based to a very large extent on previous interventions.

In several cases it is possible to prepare a call for proposal taking inspiration from similar calls launched within the OP or by other OPs. Designing a call based on the experience of previous interventions, or interventions carried out elsewhere, allows to save the time needed for the preparation activities. Furthermore, it seems that when the policy makers rely on previous experience significantly, the clarity of the call for proposals documents is slightly higher. This is the case, for example, of some calls from the Greek OP in our sample that replicated similar calls launched by other Greek OPs. This practice made it possible to save time and resources during the preparation phase and significantly reduced the time needed for identifying appropriate criteria and conducting a public consultation.

The following figures show that, on average, the number of days needed to prepare the intervention are correlated with the extent to which the call draws from previous experience. In particular, if a call is based on other interventions to a limited extent, more days are needed to prepare it. Furthermore, call documents tend to be less clear. On the contrary, if a call draws from previous experiences, less days are needed and the call documents are clearer.

**Figure 23. Relationship between number of days needed to prepare the intervention, clarity of documents and extent to which the call is based on previous interventions (N=52)**

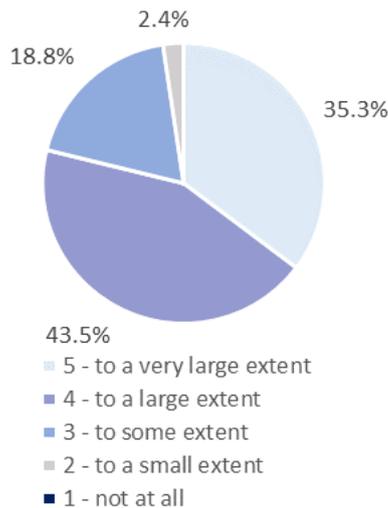


Note: Clarity of call for proposals has been assessed on a scale from 1 to 5. The graph on the right shows the average score on clarity of call for proposals documents, also on the basis of an assessment of MAs and beneficiaries.  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Degree to which the calls were aligned to beneficiary’s needs**

During the focus groups carried out in compiling the checklists, beneficiaries have been asked to assess the degree to which the call was aligned to their need on a scale from 1 to 5. In 79% of the calls, beneficiaries reported that the call for proposal was aligned to their needs to a large or very large extent. Only 2.4% of the calls have been assessed by beneficiaries as poorly aligned to their needs. In all these cases, this was due to too low financing rates.

**Figure 24. Extent to which calls are aligned to the needs of beneficiaries, overall sample (N=86)<sup>12</sup>**



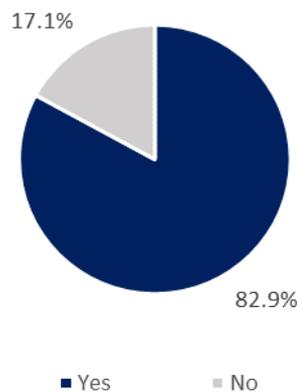
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

<sup>12</sup> Note on methodology: national experts were asked to provide the average opinion of the target beneficiaries, gathered in the interviews and workshops with the Managing authority or Intermediary bodies (if have engaged with the target beneficiaries in such discussions). If this would not be possible, such information should be gathered through the focus group discussion.

### Existence of an implementation plan

For the vast majority of the calls in our sample (83%), there was an implementation plan. This seems to be related more to the OP organisation rather than to the specific calls. For example, all the calls under the Slovak and French OPs do not refer to any implementation plan.

**Figure 25. Share of calls with or without an implementation plan (N = 82)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### 3.2.2. Definition of the selection criteria (step 3)

#### Key findings

- **Call specific selection criteria** are approved by the Monitoring Committee in about half of the analysed calls; in other cases, they are approved by the MA, by sectoral committees etc. depending on the specific programme.
- The **number of specific selection criteria** ranges from a minimum of **one to a maximum of 68**. Most frequently, the number of specific criteria is in the **range of 11-30**.
- Specific selection criteria **include eligibility, quality and priority criteria**. On average, in our sample, each call has 18 eligibility, 9 quality, and 3 priority criteria. The number of quality criteria seems to depend more on the context in which the programme is implemented than on the TO or the type of call.
- **Cost-related criteria** were used in 44% of the sample calls. For these, on average, **18% of the final score** was related to costs.
- A **higher number of selection criteria** is correlated to **longer selection processes**, higher FTE days needed to carry out the entire selection process, and a higher percentage of complaints and legal appeals.
- A higher number of selection criteria is also associated with a **lower clarity** of the criteria themselves (how they are defined and assessed) and of the **Call for Proposal (CFP) documents**.
- Calls with highly burdensome selection criteria are characterised by a longer evaluation process. In particular, the number of calendar days for evaluating a single application is almost twice (13.5) compared to the calls for which criteria are considered less burdensome (6.9).

This step of the selection process includes the definitions of the eligibility criteria, the quality and the priority criteria. Eligibility criteria refer to criteria that applicants must fulfil in order to qualify to receive funding from the call, while quality criteria are defined to judge the quality of projects and



project proposals. Priority criteria are meant to prioritise projects with similar quality on the basis of the priorities set out in the call or the OP. Within this step of the selection process, we have also collected information on the coherence of selection criteria with Article 125/3 (a, b, d, e, f, g) of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 (Common Provisions Regulation, CPR). Further, information on the process of approval of the selection criteria by the Monitoring Committee was also gathered. The full list of data gathered through the checklists is provided in the following table.

**Table 5. List of data collected for step 3**

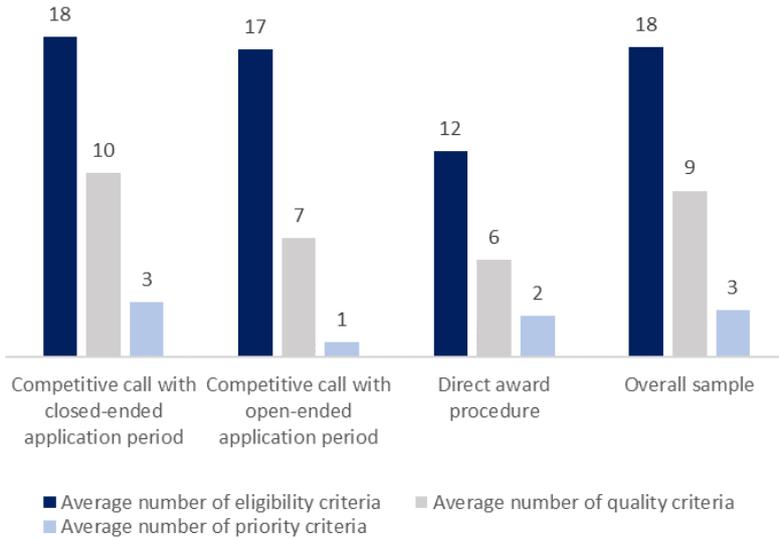
Variable	Unit of measurement
3.1 Number of administrative and eligibility criteria applicable to this call	Number of administrative and eligibility criteria applicable to this call
3.2 Number of quality criteria	Number of quality criteria
3.3 Number of priority criteria	Number of priority criteria
3.4 Share of the score for criteria linked to costs of the operation in the total score (%)	percentage
3.5 Extent to which call-specific selection criteria are coherent with the principles set out in CPR 125.3(a)	Likert scale 1 -5
3.6 Extent to which call-specific selection criteria ensure that the operation falls within the scope of the fund as set out in CPR 125.3(b)	Likert scale 1 -5
3.7 Extent to which call-specific eligibility and quality criteria are ensuring that beneficiaries have the capacities to fulfil the conditions for support for each operation (Article 125.3(d))	Likert scale 1 -5
3.8 Extent to which call-specific eligibility and quality criteria are ensuring that selected operations fulfil the requirements under CPR Article 125.3(e, f, g)	Likert scale 1 -5
3.9 Extent to which the selection criteria add additional burden on evaluation process (by for instance having an excessive amount of criteria, or low quality (vague, lack rationale, overlapping, etc) criteria)?	Likert scale 1 -5
3.10 Did the monitoring committee intervene in the formulation and approval of the eligibility, quality and priority criteria of the call?	Yes/no

### Number of eligibility, quality and priority criteria

For each call, the number of eligibility, quality and priority criteria has been collected. The average number of criteria is reported in Figure 26 by type of call and in Figure 27 by TO. Overall, there are much more eligibility criteria than quality criteria in place, while only less than half (43 out of 87) of the examined calls work with priority criteria.

Competitive calls with closed-ended application period show the highest number of eligibility, quality and priority criteria. This seems to be related to the nature of the different types of selection process. While competitive open-ended calls and direct award procedures base the selection process on the satisfaction on some minimum criteria, closed-ended competitive calls are characterised by fiercer competition and higher complexity of the calls which might result in a higher number of criteria (especially in relation to quality and priority). Nonetheless, the number of criteria varies greatly across calls depending also, in some cases, on the characteristics of the specific call for proposals or OP. Indeed, when looking at our data, the calls with the highest number of eligibility criteria mostly belongs to the Member States joining the EU last (BG, RO, HR). This may reflect the higher efforts needed to harmonise domestic and EU requirements, with possible consequences in terms of gold plating.

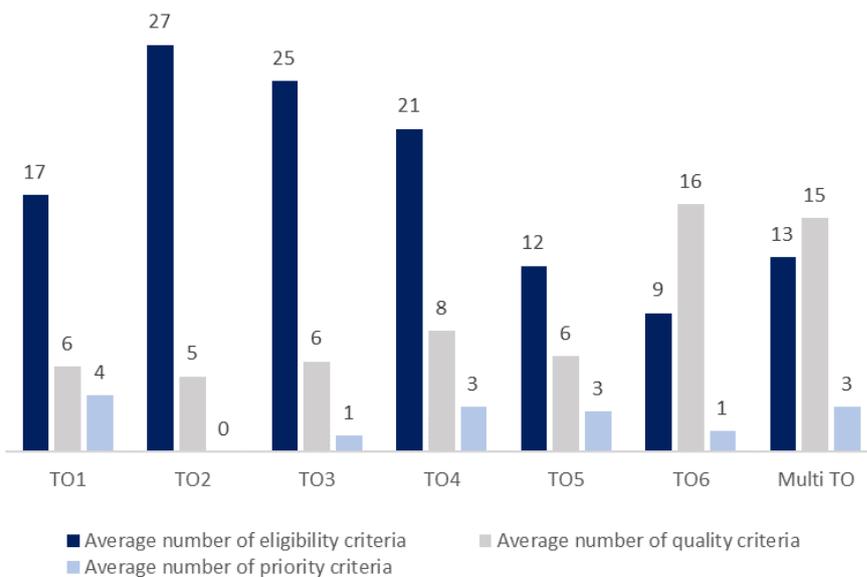
**Figure 26. Average number of eligibility, priority and quality criteria by type of call (N=84)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The number of criteria also heavily depends on the TO. For example, all the calls showing the highest number of quality criteria are launched under TO6 and multiple TOs, this is probably related to the fact that these calls are usually complex and target different kind of projects and therefore several criteria must be defined in order to assess the quality of different kind of projects. The highest number of eligibility criteria are observed in calls under TO2, TO3 and TO4, while the calls showing the highest number of priority criteria are almost exclusively closed-ended competitive calls under TO1, TO4, TO5 and multiple TOs, signalling that the number of priority criteria is highly linked to the type of selection procedure and TOs characterised by higher complexity.

**Figure 27. Average number of eligibility, priority and quality criteria by TO (N=83)**



Note: TO8 has been excluded from this analysis as the included information for only one call.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

A higher number of selection criteria seems to be correlated to longer selection processes, higher FTE days needed to carry out the entire selection process and a higher percentage of complaints and legal appeals. Despite we cannot infer causality from a simple correlation, we can provide some explanations of the correlations showed in Table 6. According to several authorities and beneficiaries interviewed, a large number of selection criteria turns into long and burdensome proposal evaluation process, since a large number of documents need to be analysed and multiple criteria evaluated. At the same time, the procedures are burdensome for the applicants who need to produce a large number of documents. All this is costly for both the authorities and the beneficiaries, especially when many applications are received and the process is not automated or supported by adequate IT tools.

**Table 6. Correlation between number of selection criteria and duration of the selection process (calendar days, and FTE days) and correlation with percentage of complaints and legal appeals**

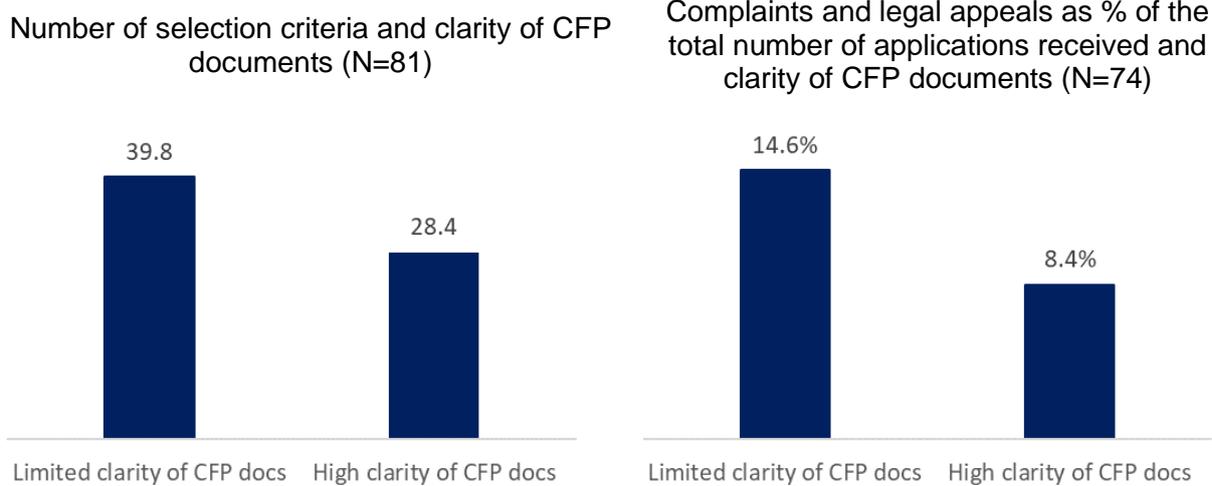
	Calendar days needed for the entire selection process	FTE days needed for the entire selection process	Percentage of complaints and legal appeals
<b>Number of selection criteria</b>	0.38	0.20	0.22

Note: The variable “Number of selection criteria” has been computed as the sum of eligibility, quality and priority criteria for each call; “calendar days needed for the entire selection process “ are computed as the difference between the end of step 9 and the start of step 4 per each call; “FTE days needed for the entire selection process” are computed as the sum of FTE days needed to carry out steps 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9 per each call; “Percentage of complaints and legal appeals” is computed as the percentage of complaints plus legal appeals received over the total amount of applications received per each call.

Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Furthermore, in our sample a higher number of selection criteria is also associated to lower clarity of the call for proposals documents, which implies also an assessment of the clarity of criteria. As shown in Figure 28, on average, limited clarity of call for proposals documents is correlated on average with a larger number of criteria. In addition to that, Figure 28 shows that calls characterised by a limited clarity of Call for Proposal (CFP) documents result in a much larger percentage of complaints and legal appeals. Therefore, we could infer that a larger number of selection criteria is associated to a lower clarity of the criteria themselves (how they are defined, how they are calculated etc.) and in general of the CFP documents, which in turn leads to a higher number of complaints received, justifying the results found in Table 6.

**Figure 28. Relationship between the average number of selection criteria (eligibility, priority and quality criteria), the percentage of complaints and legal appeals and the clarity of CFP documents**

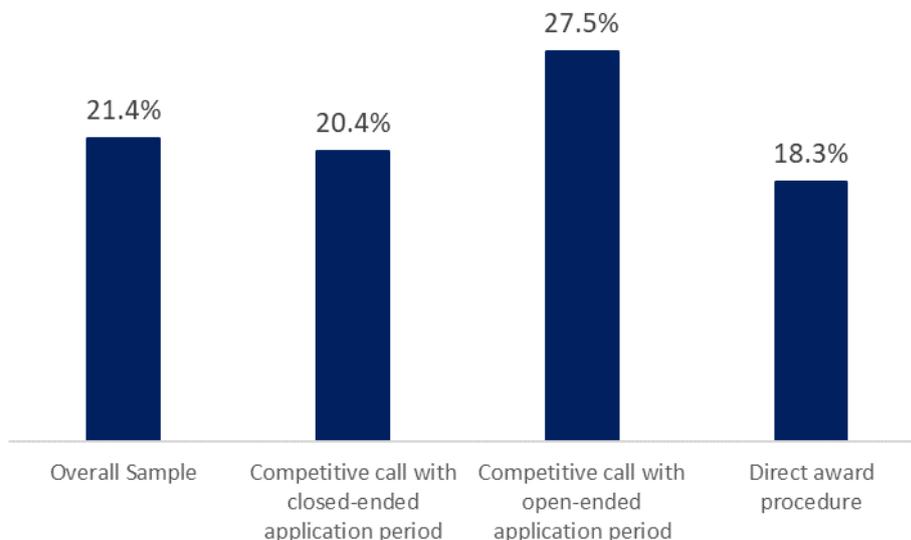


Note: "Limited clarity of CFP docs" regroups the calls that have been rated "1- not at all clear"; "2 – clear to a small extent"; "3 – clear to some extent"; "High clarity of CFP docs" regroups the calls that are "4 – clear to a large extent"; "5 – clear to a very large extent".  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

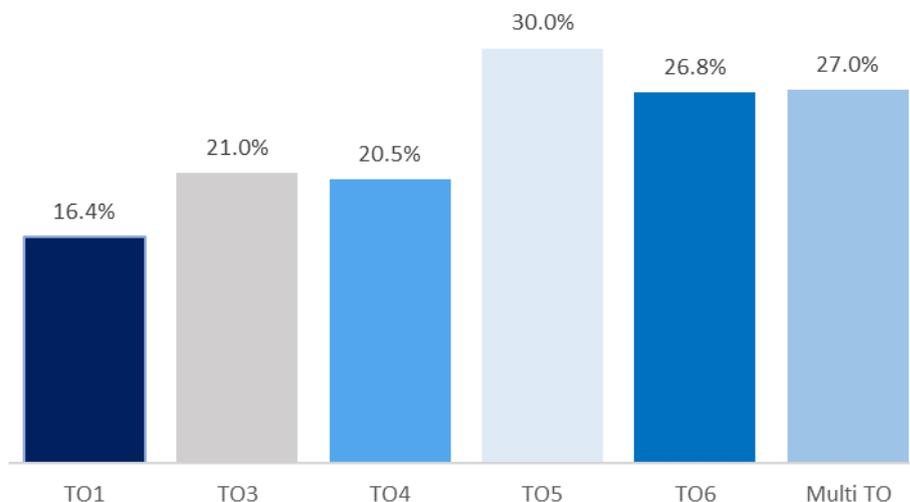
Data was also collected on the relative importance of cost-related criteria with respect to the overall maximum score. This gives an indication of the extent to which operations are selected based on their costs or value for money. In only 38 calls the experts identified criteria linked to costs, while in 47 calls, no such criteria were identified, or the share of cost criteria was 0%. In some countries, for example Italy or Germany, cost criteria were among eligibility criteria and not priority or quality criteria, i.e. that operations had to have a minimum or maximum budget in order to be eligible for the call.

On average 21.4% of the final score was related to costs for those calls that had cost-related criteria. The variation of the share of the score for criteria linked to costs of operation is not considerable across TOs, with TO6 showing the highest share of the score for cost-related criteria, and TO1 showing the lowest percentage of cost related criteria.

**Figure 29. Share of cost related criteria per type of call (N= 38)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Figure 30. Score for criteria linked to costs as share of the total score (%) by TO (N=61)**

Note: TO2 and TO8 were excluded from this analysis due to low number of observations  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Coherence with Article 125/3 of the CPR

Article 125/3 of the CPR<sup>13</sup> regulates the application of appropriate selection procedures and criteria (Article 125/3(a)), the scope and priorities of selected projects (Article 125/3(b)), the adequate communication with the beneficiaries (Article 125/3(c)) and the administrative, financial and operational capacity of beneficiaries as well as ensuring consistency with other laws and regulations that apply (Article 125/3(d, e, f, g)).

Experts judged on a scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“to a very large extent”), to what extent the criteria that are in place ensure in each call the coherence with Article 125/3 of the CPR. The data is provided in Figure 31, Figure 32, Figure 33, Figure 34. There is no meaningful variance in the data by type of call and Thematic Objective, hence the figures present only the data for the whole sample.

The great majority of the calls in the sample is assessed as coherent with Article 125/3 with a few outliers. A call from the OP in Greece, for example, is the only one judged to have criteria that are not at all coherent with Article 125/3(b), while all other calls received a score of 3 or higher. This

<sup>13</sup> According to CPR Article 125/3: “As regards the selection of operations, the managing authority shall:

(a) draw up and, once approved, apply appropriate selection procedures and criteria that: (i) ensure the contribution of operations to the achievement of the specific objectives and results of the relevant priority; (ii) are non-discriminatory and transparent; (iii) take into account the general principles set out in Articles 7 and 8;

(b) ensure that a selected operation falls within the scope of the Fund or Funds concerned and can be attributed to a category of intervention;

(d) satisfy itself that the beneficiary has the administrative, financial and operational capacity to fulfil the conditions referred to in point (c) before approval of the operation;

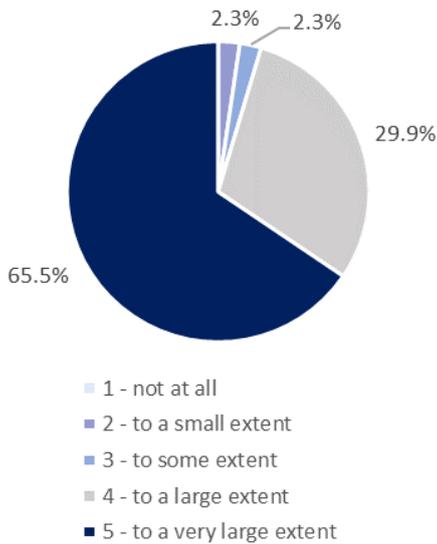
(e) satisfy itself that, where the operation has started before the submission of an application for funding to the managing authority, applicable law relevant for the operation has been complied with;

(f) ensure that operations selected for support from the Funds do not include activities which were part of an operation which has been or should have been subject to a procedure of recovery in accordance with Article 71 following the relocation of a productive activity outside the programme area;

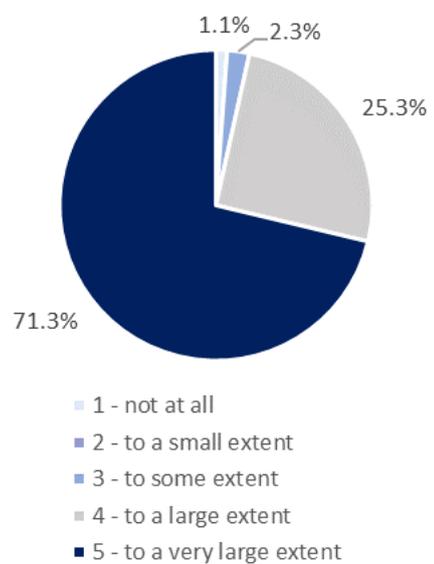
(g) determine the categories of intervention.”

was the case because the intervention itself fell within the scope of the Fund and the category of intervention was pre-defined, thus no criteria were necessary to ensure coherence with Article 125/3(b). The lowest average score is related to coherence with Article 125/3(e, f, g), on which 8 calls from 5 OPs received a score of 2 or lower. In these types of calls, coherence with Article 125/3(e, f, g) was ensured by other elements, other than the criteria, such as for example the proposal evaluation process or training of evaluators.

**Figure 31. Coherence with Article 125(a) (N=87)**

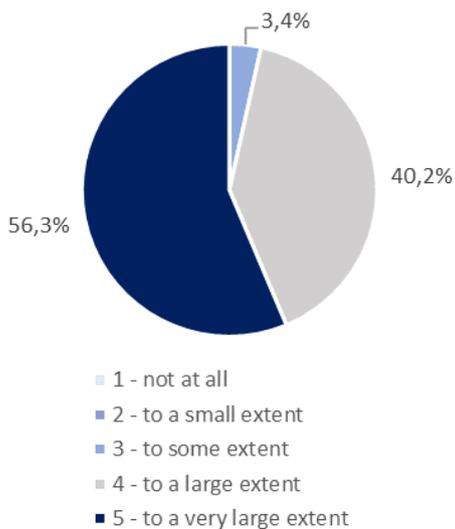


**Figure 32. Coherence with Article 125(b) (N=87)**

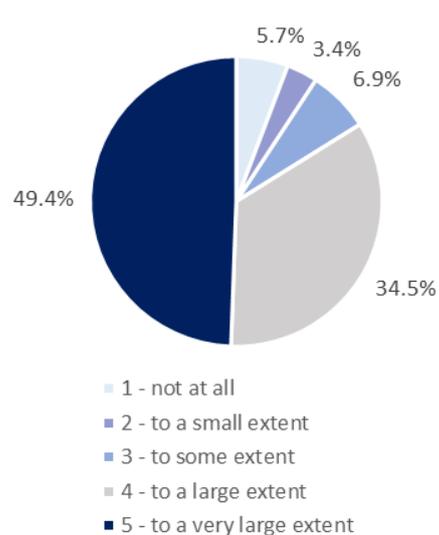


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Figure 33. Coherence with Article 125(d) (N=87)**



**Figure 34. Coherence with Article 125(e, f, g) (N=87)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Extent to which criteria were perceived as a burden

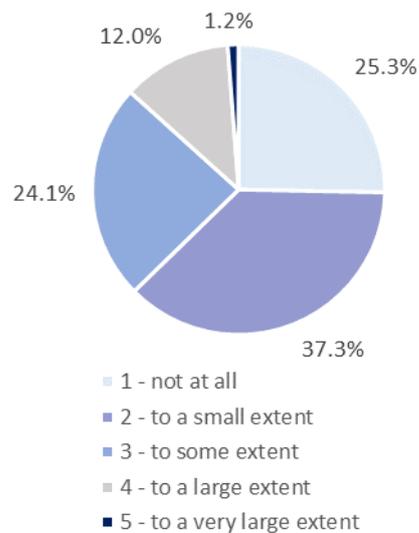
The MAs were also asked to assess the extent to which the selection criteria add additional burden on the proposal evaluation process (e.g. there can be an excessive number of criteria, or they can be vague, with weak rationale, overlapping). In 37% of the calls, the criteria were perceived as a burden at least to some extent, while in the majority of calls (63%), this was not the case.

In calls from Croatia, Portugal, Spain, Luxembourg, France, Italy and Poland the criteria were perceived to create an additional burden to a large or very large extent. All of these calls also had a higher-than-average number of eligibility and/or quality criteria.

Furthermore, additional burden can be determined by too broadly defined criteria which create difficulties for applicants and authorities on how to apply and evaluate them.

However, it was also noted that a fair share of the proposal evaluation process is dedicated to the criteria, stressing that the number and complexity of criteria can be appropriate even though their evaluation does add burden to the overall proposal evaluation process. In the case of the Portugal, considering the complex nature and the large scale of some calls for proposals, it was noted that the burden to evaluate the criteria was perceived to be appropriate, even though taking lots of resources from the evaluators.

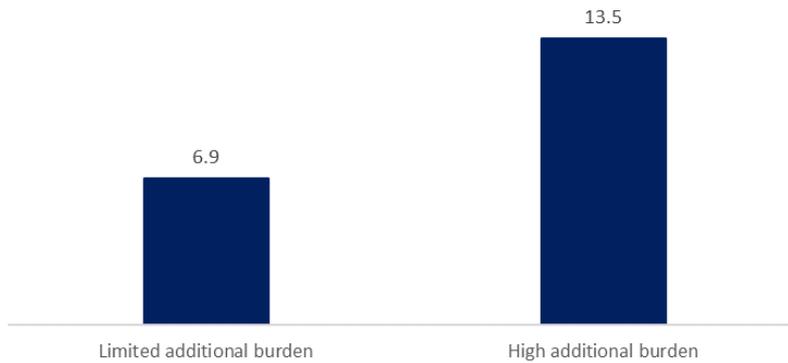
**Figure 35. Extent to which criteria were perceived as a burden (N=83)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The information on additional burden generated by vague, excessive or complex criteria can be related to the time needed to carry out the evaluation of proposals. As shown in Figure 36, calls with selection criteria that are considered highly burdensome are characterised by higher duration of the proposal evaluation. In particular the number of days needed for the proposal evaluation of a single application is almost twice (13.5) compared to the calls for which criteria are considered less burdensome (6.9). It is clear, that vague, excessive and complex criteria could represent an important source of delay for the proposal evaluation phase.

**Figure 36. Relation between the number of days needed to assess selection criteria (eligibility, quality and priority) for a single application, and the extent to which criteria were perceived as a burden (N=70)**

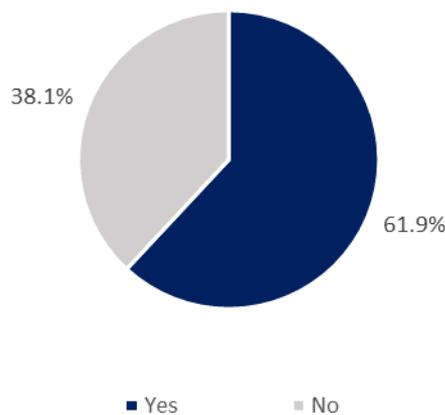


Note: "Limited additional burden" regroupes the calls for which criteria does represent an additional burden to the following extent: "1 - not at all"; "2 - to a small extent"; "3 - to some extent"; "High additional burden" regroupes the calls for which criteria does represent an additional burden to the following extent "4 - clear to a large extent"; "5 - clear to a very large extent".  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Involvement of the Monitoring Committee

This indicator is about whether the Monitoring Committee (MC) of the OP intervened in the formulation and approval of the eligibility, quality and priority criteria of the call. Data are available for 97% of the calls in our sample, and in 62% of these, the MC did intervene in this step. However, in the sample, the intervention of the MC had no significant effect on the number of days that were required for defining the selection criteria.

**Figure 37. Involvement of the Monitoring Committee in defining and approving selection criteria (N=84)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022



### 3.2.3. Drafting call for proposal documents (step 4)

#### Key findings

- When **drafting calls for proposals**, authorities of the sampled OPs produced nearly 12 documents per call, taking them, on average, 2.6 full-time working days to prepare each document. On average, around 10 documents are needed to prove eligibility.
- **Despite their proven utility public consultations are used in only a few cases** in this selection process step. Indeed, when public consultations are carried out, fewer questions on the call documents are received from the applicants during the application process. Furthermore, higher clarity of the call documents means less time dedicated to proposal appraisals.

This step of the selection process is concerned with the drafting of the call for proposal documents which indicate all thematic, financial and administrative conditions for applicants, operations, selection and award process. Furthermore, this step covers the process of validating the call for proposal documents with the MA (if applicable). The data gathered through the checklists are listed in the following table.

**Table 7. List of data collected for step 4**

Variable	Unit of measurement
4.1 Total persons involved	Number of persons
4.2 of whom: internal officials	Number of persons
4.3 of whom: external personnel (TA or experts)	Number of persons
4.4 Number of full-time working days required to the involved personnel	Number of days
4.5 Number of call for proposal documents drafted	Number of documents
4.6 Type of call for proposal documents drafted	Multiple choice
4.7 Validation & approval of call for proposal documents	Qualitative answer
4.8 Public consultation process on call for proposal documents	Multiple choice
4.9 To what extent are/were the call for proposal documents easily accessible to interested applicants on MA/IB websites?	Likert scale 1 -5
4.10 Extent to which CFP documents are clear to applicants	Likert scale 1 -5
4.11 Number of documentary evidence required to provide evidences of the eligibility criteria	Number of evidences

#### Persons involved in drafting the call documents

The average number of persons involved in drafting the call for proposal documents is shown in Figure 38 by type of call and by TO in Figure 39. Further, Figure 40 shows the number of person days (in FTE – full time equivalent) required to draft the call documents by type of call, while Figure 41 shows the same variable by TO.

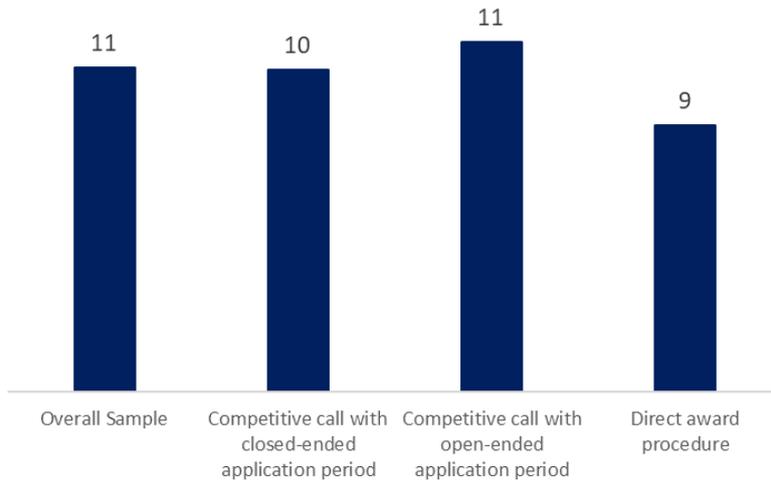
On average, 11 persons were involved in the drafting process for an average of 30 FTE days. There are significant outliers in relation to the number of people involved, namely a few calls with more than 75 persons participating in drafting the documents. However, in these cases the FTE days are lower than average.

One of the results of the data collection showed that when there is a lack of digital tools/processes in place, this leads to a more burdensome drafting process. A lack of clear distribution of tasks and work was also considered a cause of complex process involving a high number of personnel, which deserves simplification.

It is worth noting that direct award procedures required less personnel than other types of calls. When looking at the FTE days required for this step, this is even more visible and direct awards required significantly less FTE days for preparing the documents, as displayed in Figure 40.

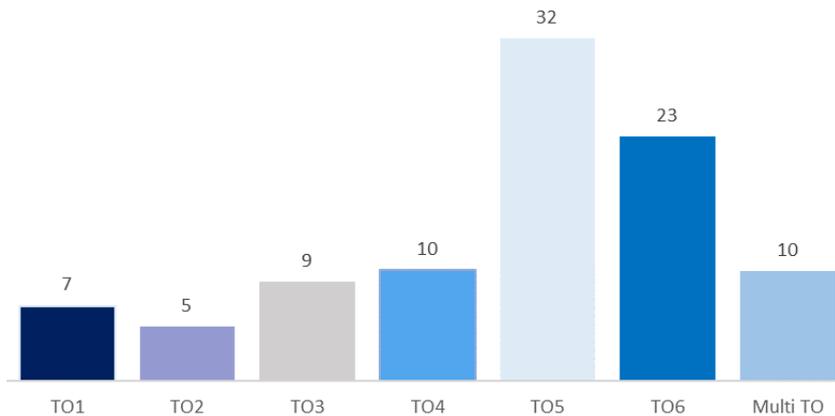
Further, TO5 and TO6 required to involve more personnel in the drafting of the call documents compared to other TOs. On the other hand, calls under TO2 and TO3, despite requiring less people, still needed a higher-than-average number of FTE days, indicating a resource intensive process.

**Figure 38. Average number of personnel involved in the drafting of call for proposal documents by type of call (N=85)**



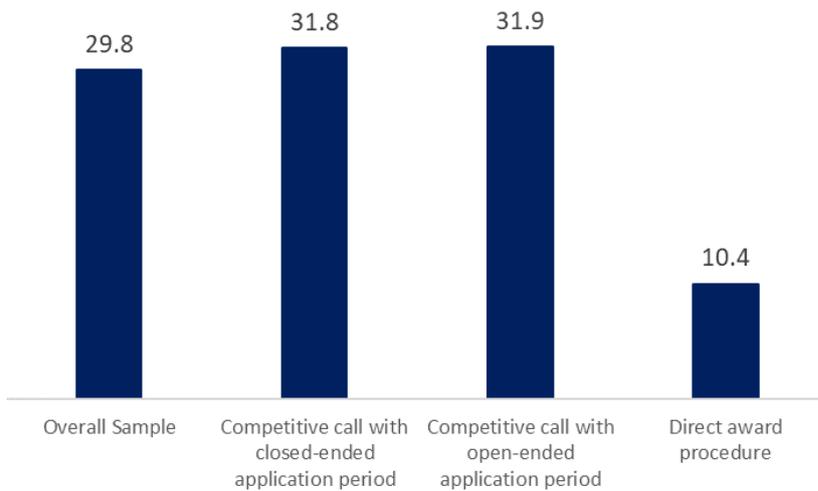
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Figure 39. Average number of personnel involved in the drafting of call for proposal documents by TO (N=84)**



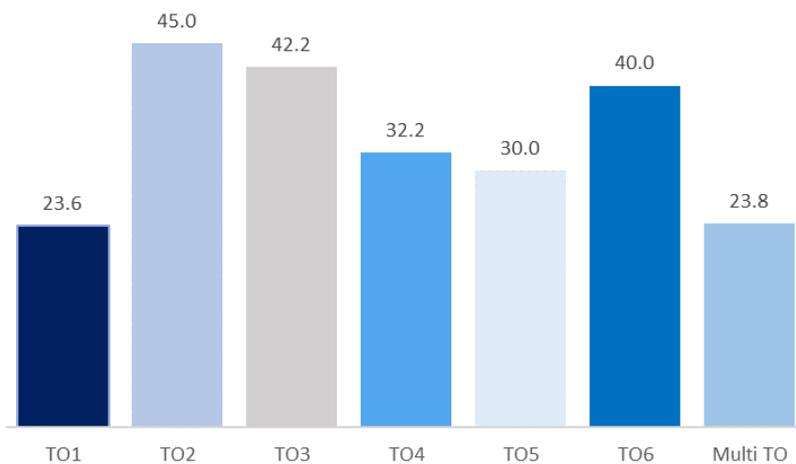
Note: TO8 excluded as only one observation was available  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Figure 40. Average number of FTE days required for the drafting of call for proposal documents by type of call (N=67)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

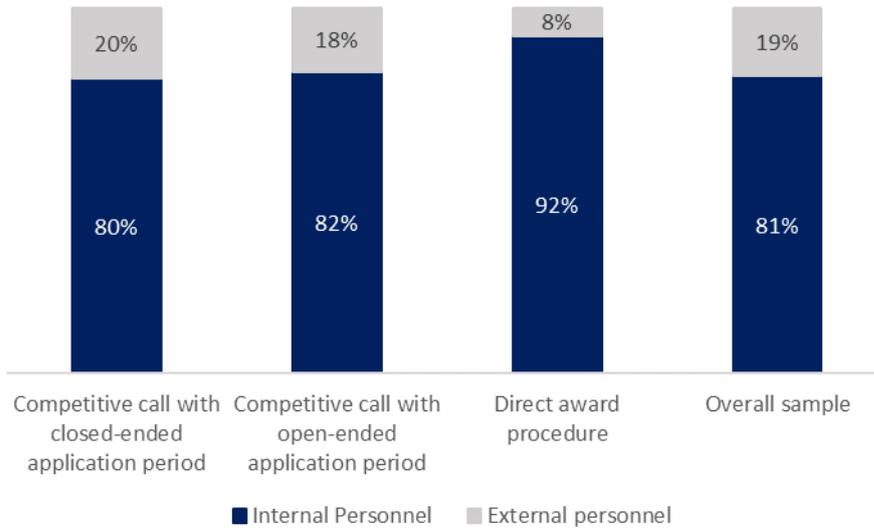
**Figure 41. Average number of FTE days required for the drafting of call for proposal documents by TO (N=66)**



Note: TO8 excluded as only one observation was available  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

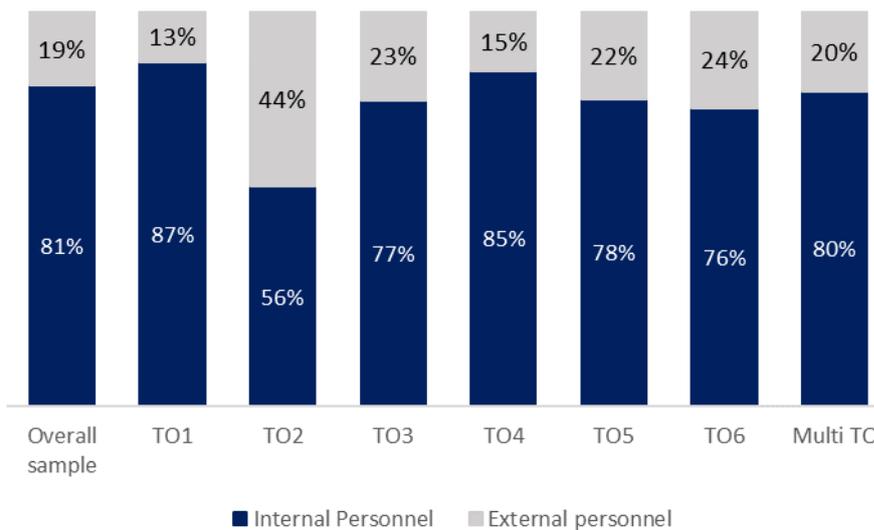
The following figures report the share of external personnel involved in the drafting of call for proposal documents by type of call and by TO. On average, 19% of the personnel involved in the drafting of call for proposal documents were external to the Managing Authority. However, in 16 calls from 9 OPs (Alpine Space, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden), the share of external personnel involved in step 4 was higher than 50%. External personnel were mainly used in competitive procedures, as in direct awards only 8% of the personnel involved was external. The share of external personnel is fairly equal across different TOs. The differences in TO2 can be explained by the low number of observations.

**Figure 42. Share of external personnel by type of call (N=81)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Figure 43. Share of external personnel by TO (N=80)**

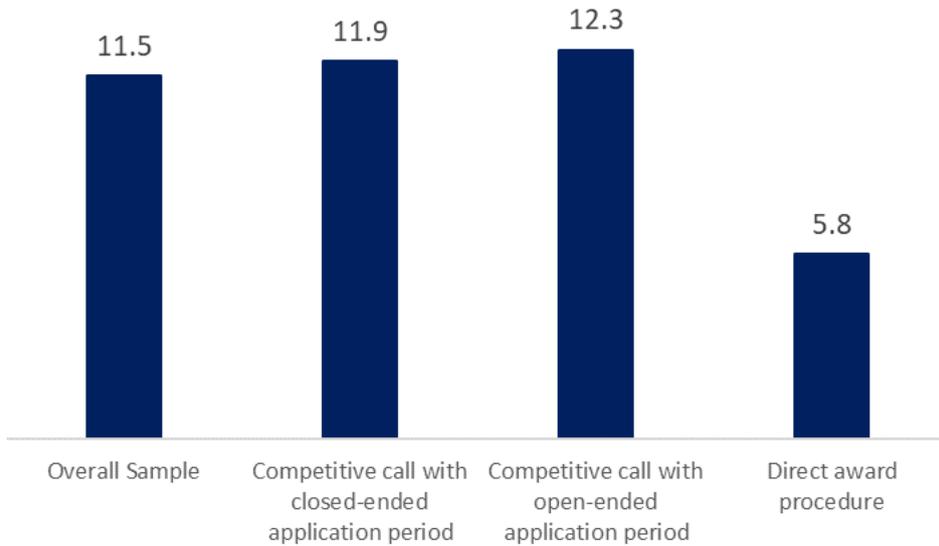


Note: TO8 excluded as only one observation was available  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Number and types of documents drafted**

On average, 11.5 documents per call are drafted. On average there is not a significant difference between the number of documents drafted between open-ended and closed-ended competitive calls (in both cases around 12), direct award procedures show a much lower number of documents. This could justify the much lower number of persons involved in this step and the much lower number of FTE days needed to carry out this step for direct awards compared to competitive calls.

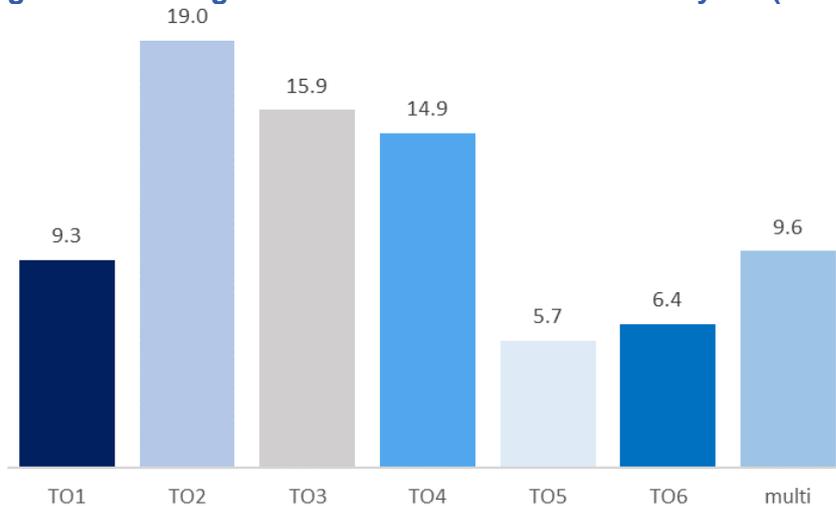
**Figure 44. Average number of documents drafted by type of call (N=86)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Regarding the number of documents drafted, the situation is varied across TOs, with calls under TO2, TO3 and TO4 showing the highest number of documents. However, the distribution of number of documents per TO is likely to be highly influenced by the relative distribution of the type of call by TO rather than TO specific factors.

**Figure 45. Average number of documents drafted by TO (N=85)**



Note: TO8 excluded as only one observation was available  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

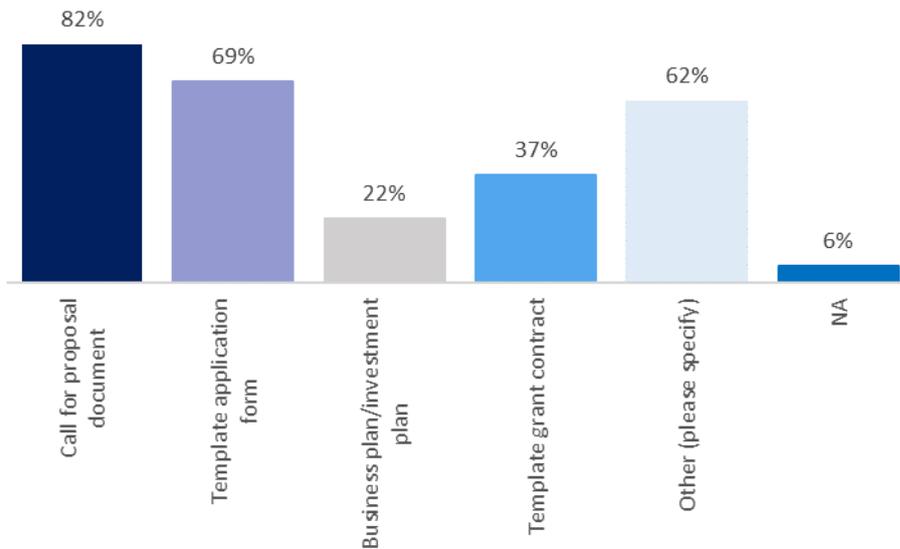
Figure 46 shows the types of documents that have been prepared by authorities. The selection was done based on predefined categories, and multiple selection of document types was possible. For almost all calls, the MAs indicated that general digital “call for proposal documents” and templates of the application form were prepared, while only in 19 calls a business/investment plan was produced. In several cases, the authorities selected the category “other” types of documents which includes:

- Guidance documents and advice on “how to apply”
- Guidelines on indicator monitoring and communication materials
- Information on the evaluation of criteria

- Guidance on implementation of procurement
- Rules on financial corrections
- Administrative forms (i.e. commitment letter from partners, financial identification forms etc.)

Guidance documents on “how to apply” have been highlighted as being especially useful in facilitating the application process and simplifying the support provided to applicants. This was mentioned, for example, in calls from Germany and Ireland.

**Figure 46. Types of documents prepared when drafting a CFP (N=84)**



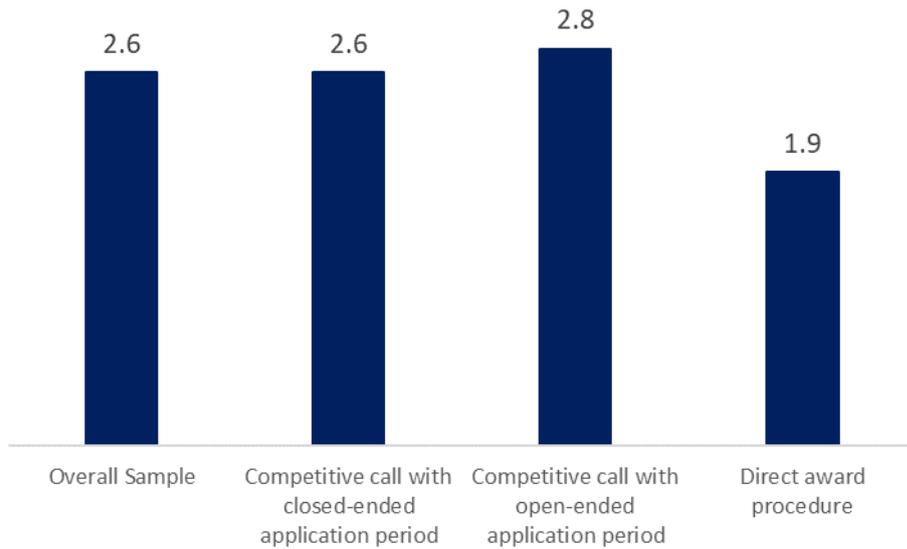
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Number of FTE days per document drafted

Figure 47 and Figure 48 show the number of full-time working days that were necessary per document drafted by type of call for proposals and by TO. This indicator was calculated by dividing the number of full-time working days, that were reported for this step of the selection process, by the number of documents that were produced. On average, authorities drafted 11 documents per call for proposals, and it took them 2.6 full-time working days to draft one document. The indicator ranges from 0.1 days to 18 days per document. Especially Sweden stands out in terms of efficiency, as for each call managing authorities drafted around 16 documents, and it took them 2 days for each document.

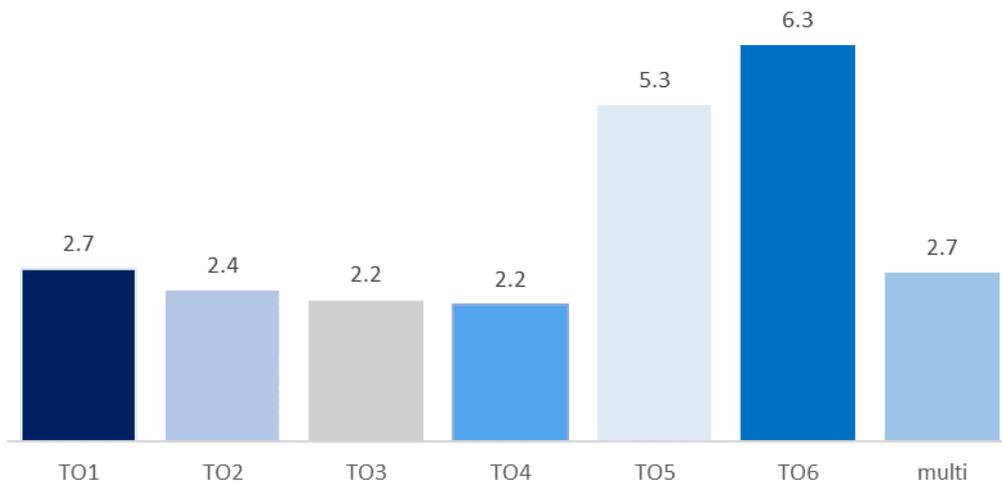
In direct award procedures, the number of days required were lower than the average, while competitive calls had a higher number of days required per drafting of documents. Similarly, the number of documents drafted was lower on average for direct award procedures (5.8 documents on average) compared to competitive procedures (12.1 documents on average). The number of days needed per each document shows no big variation across TOs, except for TO5 and TO6 which again can be explained by the low number of observations.

**Figure 47. Average number of FTE days needed to draft one document by type of call (N=65)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Figure 48. Average number of FTE days needed to draft one document by TO (N=64)**



Note: TO8 excluded as only one observation was available  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Public consultation process on calls for proposals**

Public consultations are seldom implemented, in most OPs covered in our analysis. Even when they are carried out, they are organised at a very early stage and have limited numbers of participants (e.g. local governments and stakeholders identified by MA or IB). Only in a limited number of OPs, wider public consultations are implemented on a regular basis (HR, BG, EL, LT, RO, RO-SER, SE). In the cases of calls in which the public consultations are not so common, there were far more questions asked and clarifications required during the application process. It could be concluded that a more intensive stakeholder consultation during the drafting of the call can significantly reduce the number of questions and requests for clarification, once the call is launched.

### **Validation and approval of calls for proposals**

Some open questions were also asked in the process of compiling the checklists. In relation to the step of drafting the documents for the calls for proposals, information on validation of CFP documents and on public consultations was gathered.

The analysis of the collected information shows that in most cases, the MA leads the drafting of such documents but several institutions (e.g. IB) and/or teams (e.g. SC, MC) are typically involved. In the cases of interregional or transnational programmes, the Joint Technical Secretariat drafts the CFP documents while the participating countries (via the Joint Monitoring Committee) as well as other relevant stakeholders provide their feedback and suggestions (e.g. by using workshops or meetings). In a number of cases (the most representative being DE and DK) the associations representing the target group (e.g. businesses) really have a strong voice and without their endorsement, the CFP would not be approved.

Nonetheless, there are several differences in respect to validation and approval of calls. Some examples of different approaches, emerging from the collected information, are listed below:

- In some cases such as the BE OP, the MA prescribes all elements of the CFP while the MC and the local government (Valonia in the considered case) are approving final documents.
- In CY, the IB drafts the CFP but then it needs to be approved by the MA.
- In DE, the regional court of auditors also checks the CFP, and this approach adds some additional administrative burden.
- In EE, the IB is both drafting and approving documents while in LU, the MC is drafting and approving all documents.
- In MT, an internal unit is drafting all documents and the chief coordinator is approving them.
- In NL, the SC and the MC are approving the final version of the CFPs.
- In RO, all CFPs are approved through a ministry order.
- In MT, SI and SK, a Coordinating body (responsible for the coordination of EU funds) has the last say. In most cases, the coordinating body is checking the coherence of the CFP with other strategic documents, namely the Smart Specialisation Strategy (as in the case of SL).

It seems to be very important to consult on the draft CFP with other relevant sectoral organisations outside of the formal operating structure to ensure that the needs and potential constraints of the target groups are addressed properly. Furthermore, the inputs from the sectoral organisations seem helpful to ensure that all the sector-specific legal and administrative issues are taken into consideration (such as environmental assessment, licencing and permits, etc.). Wider stakeholder consultations seem to facilitate both the application and implementation process.

There were examples of difficulties encountered in the implementation phase, due to unplanned administrative or legal obstacles (e.g. DE, SK, CZ).

### **Accessibility of call for proposal documents to applicants**

On a scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“to a very large extent”), national experts provided an assessment of the extent to which CFP documents are accessible, on the MA/IBs websites, by the beneficiaries or interested applicants. Figure 49 indicates an overall high accessibility considering that for almost 75% of the calls, documents are accessible to a very large extent according to applicants and beneficiaries. This is supported by an average score of 4.6.

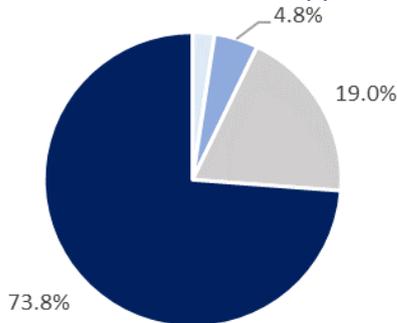
On a scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“to a very large extent”), national experts also provided an assessment of the extent to which the CFP documents on the MA/IB websites are clear for beneficiaries or interested applicants. Similar to the previous indicator, in most calls this has been judged positively. Documents are clear for applicants to a very large extent in 38% of the calls,



and to a large extent in 45% of calls.<sup>14</sup> While this is still a very high score, it is still slightly lower compared to the accessibility of call documents.

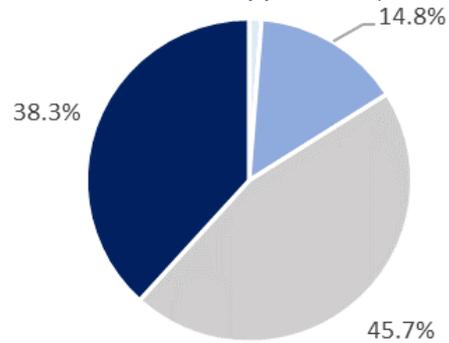
**Figure 49. Extent to which CFP documents are easily accessible and clear to interested applicants**

Extent to which CFP documents are easily accessible to interested applicants (N=84)



- 1 - not at all
- 2 - to a small extent
- 3 - to some extent
- 4 - to a large extent
- 5 - to a very large extent

Extent to which CFP documents are clear to interested applicants (N=81)



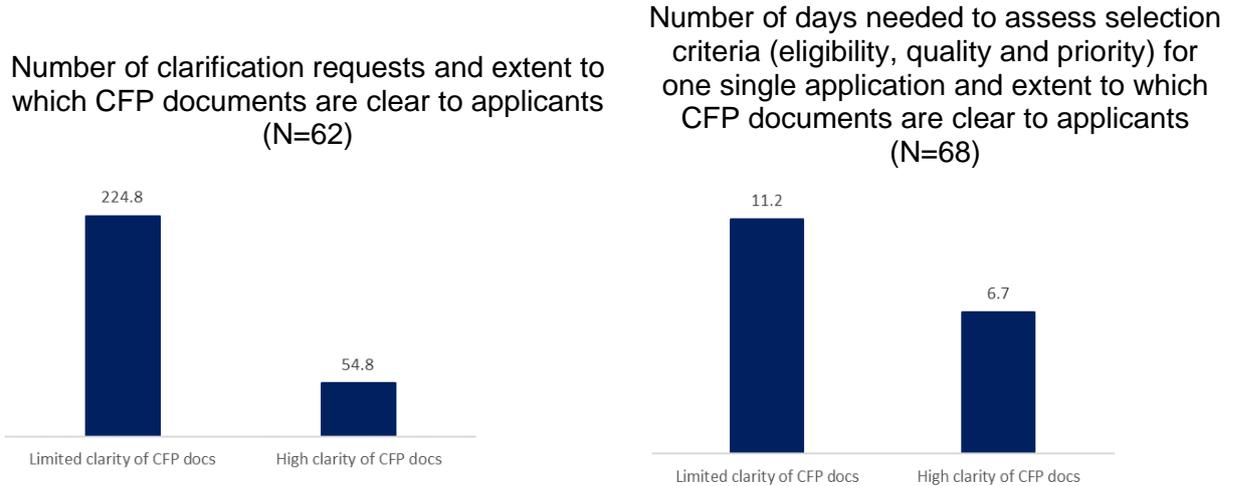
- 1 - not at all
- 2 - to a small extent
- 3 - to some extent
- 4 - to a large extent
- 5 - to a very large extent

Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

As already shown in paragraph 3.2.2, higher clarity of call for proposals documents is related to lower complaints and legal appeals. Higher clarity of CFP documents also reduces the clarifications requests sent by the MA/IBs to applicants during the proposal evaluation phase since, when documents are clear, applicants tend to make less mistakes. Furthermore, high clarity of documents allows to save a substantial amount of time during the proposal evaluation phase. In fact, 6.7 days are needed to assess the selection criteria for a single application of call for proposals when CFP documents are considered very clear, while the number of days increases to 11.2 when documents are not sufficiently clear.

<sup>14</sup> The clarity of documents to applicants has been assessed by asking applicants whether they had difficulties in understanding the call documents, and taking into consideration the number of clarification requests received by the MA from applicants.

**Figure 50. Relationship between the number of clarification requests, the number of days needed to assess selection criteria, and the extent to which documents are considered clear by applicants.**

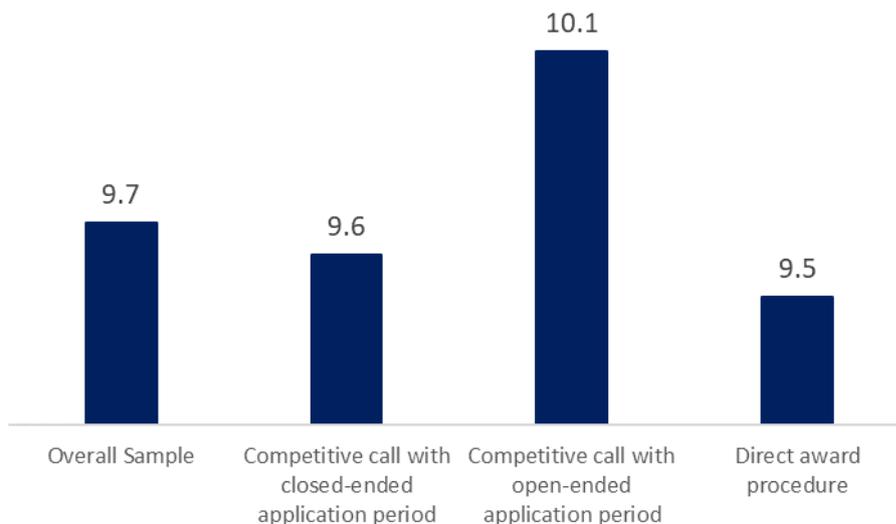


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

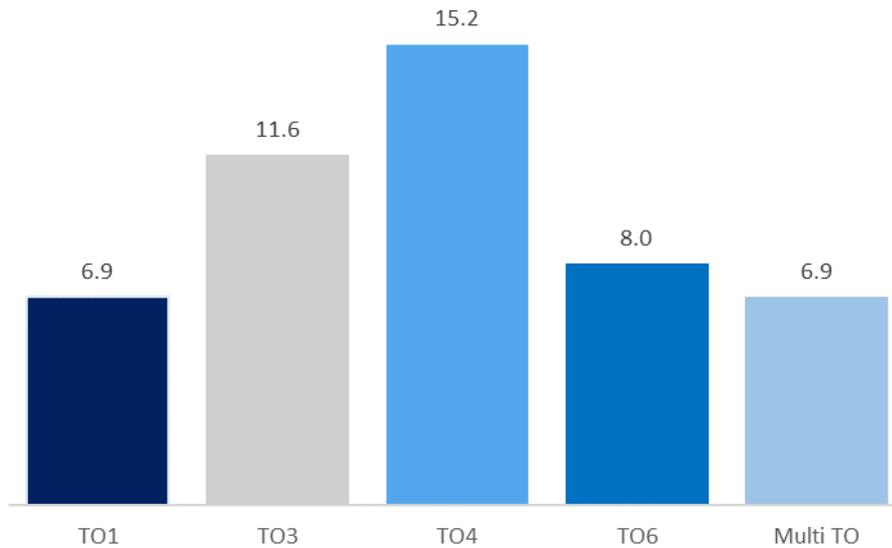
**Number of documentary evidence needed**

Experts, based on a consultation with authorities and beneficiaries, were asked to indicate the number of documentary evidence that was required from applicants to prove their eligibility. Figure 51 and Figure 52 show the average number of documentary evidence needed to prove the eligibility criteria by type of call and by TO. Calls with open-ended application procedures stand out with a comparatively high number of documentary evidence required (around 10). On average, applicants had to submit 0.5 documents per eligibility criteria, with no significant variation among types of calls for proposals or TOs.

**Figure 51. Average number of documentary evidence needed to prove eligibility by type of call (N=80)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Figure 52. Average number of documentary evidence needed to prove eligibility by TO (N=79)**

Note: TO2, TO5 and TO8 were excluded from this analysis due to very low number of observations  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### 3.2.4. Launch of calls for proposal (step 5)

#### Key findings

- **While launching a call** the great majority of MAs **disseminate information** via their **own websites**, but **social media are gaining more importance** (30% MAs used them as a dissemination channel).
- Various support **services are provided** to applicants. Around half of the MAs in our sample provide helpdesk services, arrange information meetings, or manage a FAQ service.
- Furthermore, many MAs provide **individual feedback** via various communication channels (e.g. email, phone, in person). The availability of support to applicants during the application phase results in fewer complaints and legal appeals, as it reduces application mistakes and misunderstandings.

This step of the selection process captures the launch of the calls for proposal, and the publishing of the documents according to national rules. It includes launching communication campaigns, providing information, Q&A to interested applicants, information sessions to the potential applicants, helpdesk service, etc. The data on this step, gathered through the checklists, are listed in the following table.

**Table 8. List of data collected for step 5**

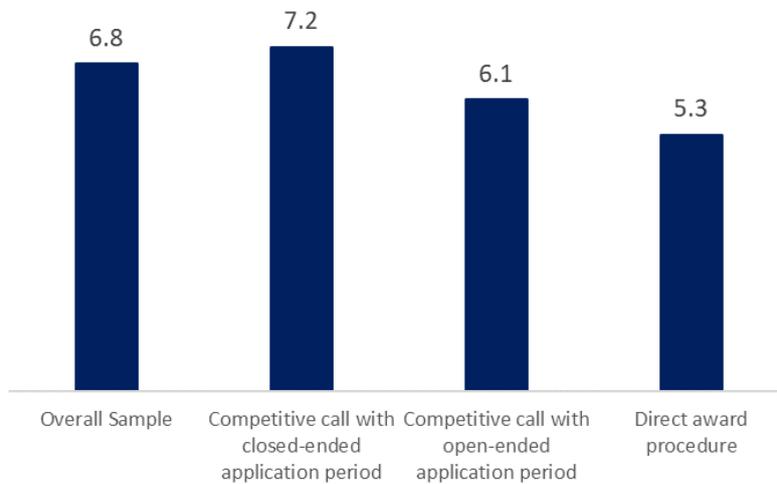
Variable	Unit of measurement
5.1 Total persons involved	Number of persons
5.2 of whom: internal officials	Number of persons
5.3 of whom: external personnel (TA or experts)	Number of persons
5.4 Number of full-time working days required to the involved personnel	Number of days
5.5 Practices and tools used to publish and promote the call	Multiple choice
5.6 Description of support offered to potential applicants	Multiple choice
5.7 Extent to which applicants are satisfied with the communication and support offered	Likert scale (1-5)

### Persons involved in the launch of the calls for proposals

Data on the number of persons involved in the launch of call for proposals are available for 94% of calls in our sample. On average, a total of 6.8 persons (internal and external) were involved in this step, ranging from 1 to 26 persons in the sample. The highest number of persons involved in the launch of the call for proposal were recorded in calls from Poland, Estonia, and the Interreg OP from Romania/Serbia.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 53 and Figure 54 show the average number of personnel involved in the launch of calls for proposals by type of call and by TO. The lower number of personnel involved in the launch of calls with direct award procedures can be explained by the fact that beneficiaries are usually well defined in direct award procedures. Targeted beneficiaries in calls with direct award procedures were public authorities or state-owned enterprises, thus the communication or information activities undertaken by authorities were more streamlined.

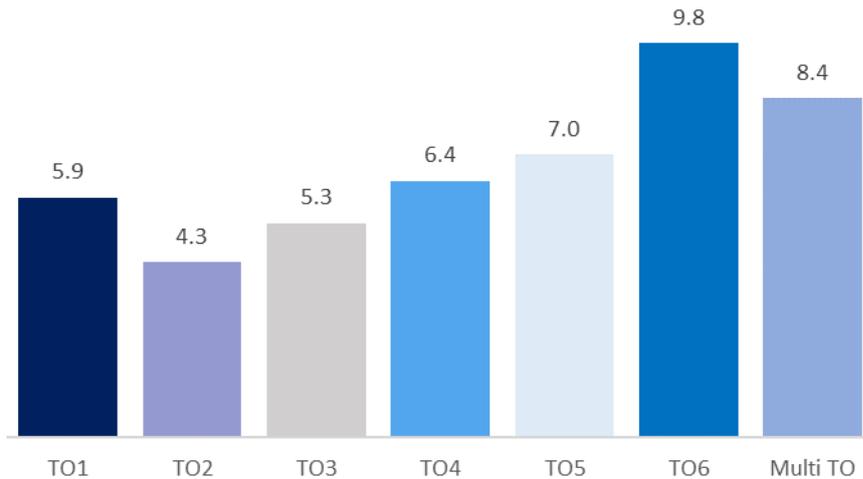
**Figure 53. Average number of personnel involved in the launch of calls for proposal by type of call (N=82)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

<sup>15</sup> Data on FTE days will be presented in the following subchapter and the analysis will be linked to the analysis of the number of personnel involved

**Figure 54. Average number of personnel involved in the launch of calls for proposal by TO (N=81)**

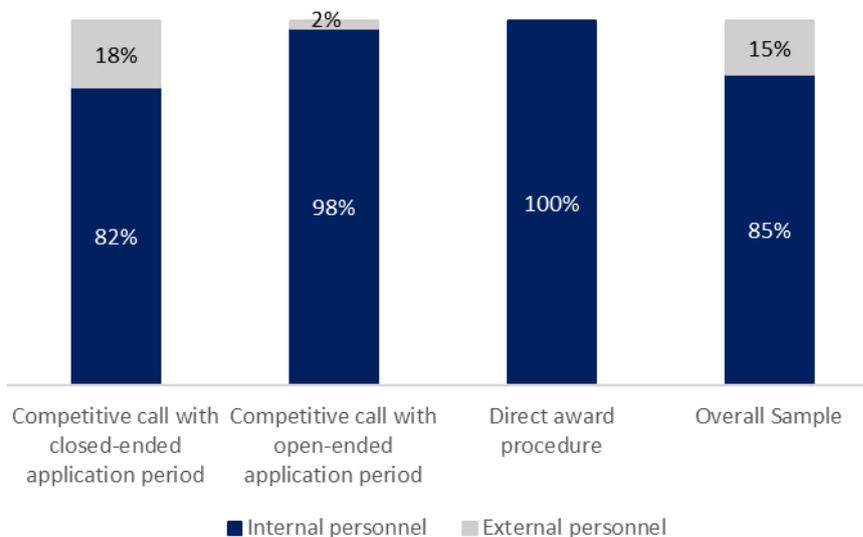


Note: TO8 was excluded from this analysis due to very low number of observations  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

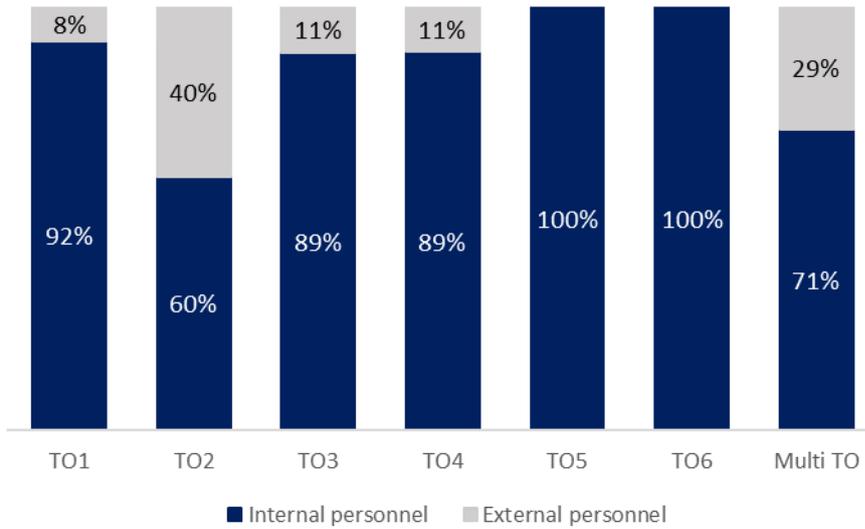
Among the 76 calls where data is available, on average 15% of the involved personnel was external to the MA/IB. In 29 calls, no external experts were involved, and only two calls from Sweden relied entirely on external personnel.

The involvement of external personnel was lower than average in relation to TO1, TO3 and TO4, and the highest in TO2. Closed-ended competitive calls use the highest share of external personnel (18%) compared to open-ended (2%) and direct award procedures (0%). This can be linked to the fact that on average closed-ended selection procedure require a more concentrated effort in limited amount of time, as submission of the application is possible only in a predetermined window of time, while in open-ended competitive calls, applications are submitted on a rolling basis meaning that the effort is less concentrated and, therefore, a lower number of human resources is needed (this is confirmed by the analysis on FTE days in Figure 57). This dynamic is also reflected in the percentage of external and internal personnel as usually MA/IBs hire external personnel (e.g. technical assistance) to compensate for the shortage of personnel.

**Figure 55. Average share of external personnel involved in step 5 by TO (N=76)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Figure 56. Average share of external personnel involved in step 5 by TO (N=75)**

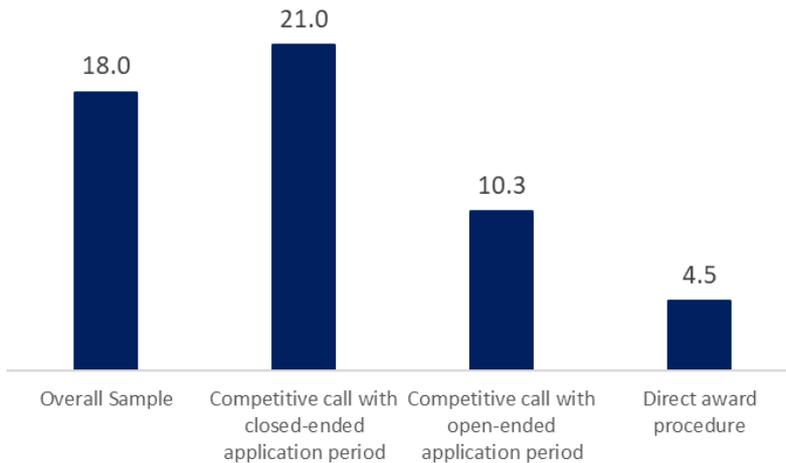
Note: TO8 was excluded from this analysis due to very low number of observations  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Number of FTE days required for launching the calls

The estimations of the full-time working days required for the launch of calls for proposals were collected during workshops with the MAs/IBs. Data is available for 67 calls or 77% of the total sample. On average, this step required 18 working days, while a maximum of 130 days was reported for one call in Bulgaria and a minimum of 0.25 working days for one Greek call. In the case of Bulgaria, the high workload was justified by an extension of the application deadline, due to high interest among applicants, which subsequently caused higher workload for the involved personnel.

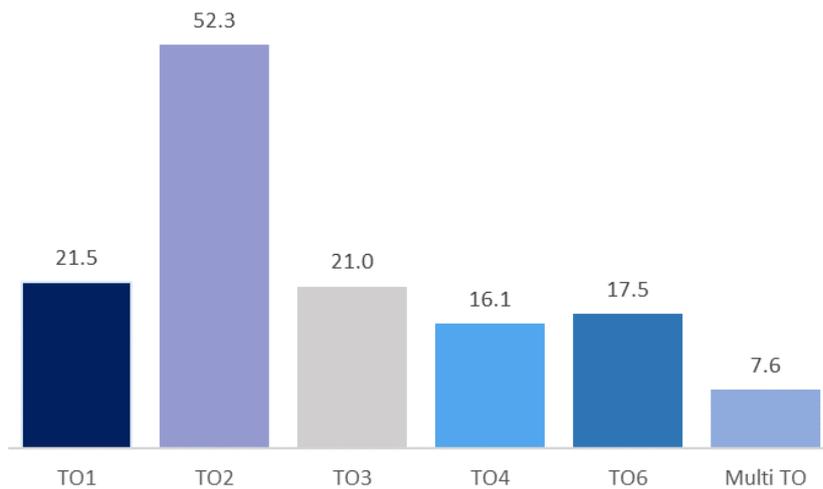
Direct award procedures required significantly less work in launching the calls for proposals as usual a very limited number of applications is received under direct awards. Calls covering multiple Thematic Objectives required fewer working days in the launch of calls for proposals than the overall sample, while calls under TO2 were the most work-intensive, on average, during the launch phase.

**Figure 57. Average number of FTE days required for step 5 by type of call (N=67)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Figure 58. Average number of FTE days required for step 5 by TO (N=64)**



Note: TO5 and TO8 were excluded from this analysis due to very low number of observations  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Practices and tools used to publish and promote the call**

The data on the practices and tools used to promote the calls is provided in Figure 59. For 85 calls (98% of our sample), information on these practices and tools is available. Multiple selection was possible, and the share reported in the table is the percentage of calls that used some tools to promote the calls compared to the total sample.

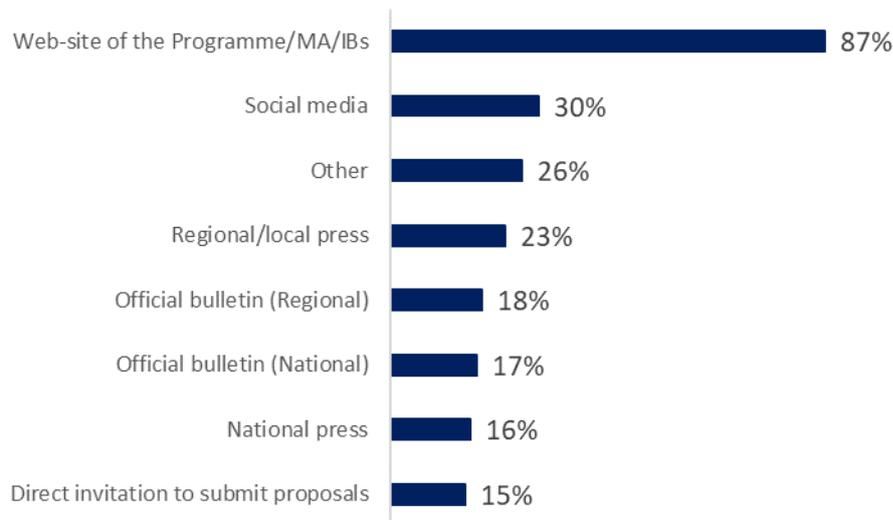
In almost all cases, the call for proposal documents are published on the websites, either of the OP or the MA/IB. As regards other tools, their usage is more heterogeneous. Especially publication in regional or national official bulletins, national press or direct invitation to submit proposals have been less popular. It is interesting to note that social media, such as LinkedIn, are becoming more and more relevant to advertise the calls, as they allow to reach out to a wider public.

The data shows that the practices and tools depend highly on the targeted beneficiaries. Direct invitations to submit proposals were mostly used in calls that are targeted to public authorities or state-owned companies, while in calls that were targeted at companies the tools used were more

diverse. Among the calls that selected the category “other”, the following types of practices to advertise the calls were mentioned:

- Presence of MA/IB at fairs or conventions
- Advertisements on websites, newspapers or public screens (e.g. subways)
- Interviews in dedicated radio talk-show
- Information emails to target group via associations or other organisations

**Figure 59. Frequency of use of different practices and tools to promote the call (share of total calls; N=85)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Support offered to potential applicants

Data on the support offered to potential applicants is provided in Figure 60. For 84 calls (97% of our sample), information on the offered support is available. Multiple selection was possible also in this case, and the shares shown in the figure refer to the percentages of calls that provided some sort of support to potential applicants compared to the total sample.

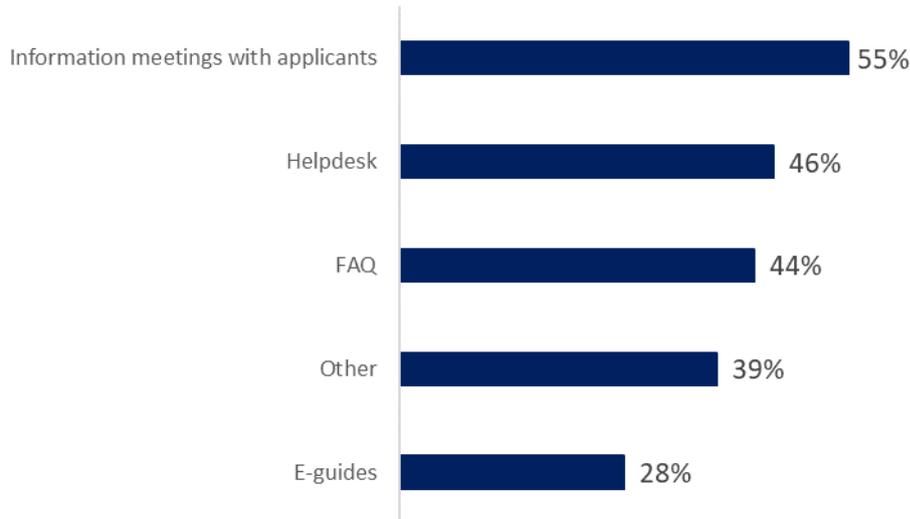
Around half of the MAs provide helpdesk services, arrange information meetings or manage a FAQ service. E-guides have been used to a lesser extent. In around 40% of the calls, other support was offered to applicants. This can be summarised by the following categories:

- Individual feedback via email on draft proposals
- Individual consultations via video calls
- Training session and transcripts of training sessions posted online

Almost all of the calls in which “other” type of support to potential applicants was indicated, this included some sort of individual counselling or feedback to applicants. This was done either through dedicated events or on ad-hoc basis, according to applicant needs. Various formats were used for such individual support, ranging from sending feedback via email, to having personal meetings physically or online.



**Figure 60. Frequency of provision of support to potential applicants (N=84)**

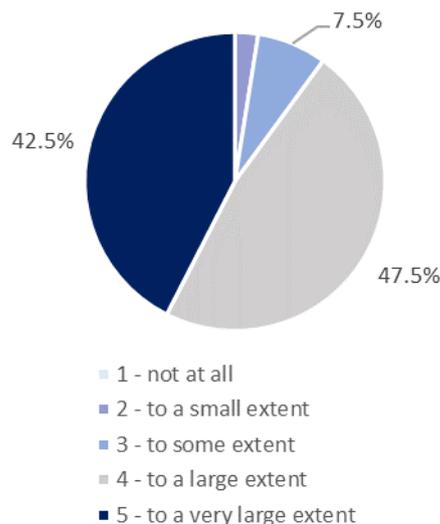


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Extent to which applicants are satisfied with the communication and support offered**

On a scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“to a very large extent”), national experts provided an assessment of whether beneficiaries or interested applicants were satisfied with the communication activities offered by the MA/IB. This has been judged based on the feedback received from applicants during the focus groups. The data is available for 80 calls (92% of the sample). Figure 61 provides the distribution of the data, and it generally shows that beneficiaries were overall satisfied with the communication activities. This is supported by an average score of 4.4.

**Figure 61. Extent to which applicants are satisfied with the offered support (N=80)**

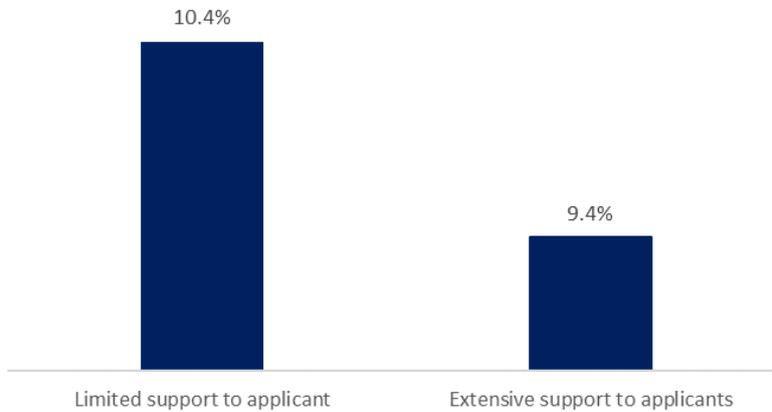


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The degree of satisfaction of beneficiaries with the support received can be related to the number of complaints and legal appeals. As shown in Figure 62, providing extensive support to applicants during the application phase results in less complaints and legal appeals, as it reduces mistakes

in the applications, it clarifies elements of the call for proposals documents, and reduces misunderstandings.

**Figure 62. Relation between complaints and legal appeals received (as % of total of applications) and the extent to which applicants are satisfied with the offered support (N=70)**



Note: "Limited support to applicant" regroups the calls for which applicants are satisfied of the support received to the following extent: "1- not at all"; "2 – to a small extent"; "3 – to some extent"; "High support to applicants" regroups the calls for which applicants are satisfied of the support received to the following extent "4 – clear to a large extent"; "5 – clear to a very large extent".  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### 3.2.5. Submission of applications (step 6)

#### Key findings

- The **submission of applications** was at least partly digitalised in 85% of the sampled calls. This phase of the selection process is quicker for calls where applications are fully digitalised which suggests **significant efficiency gains from using IT tools in this step**.
- Most digital application systems rely on online application platforms where applicants can fill out forms or upload their application documents. In 40% of the calls there are also **automated checks** which optimise and speed up the process further. When IT solutions for submitting applications are internally interoperable with IT solutions used in other steps of the selection (e.g. for the appraisal of proposals and communication), and externally, with other databases and registers, there are important efficiency gains for both authorities and applicants.
- In general, **digitalisation saves up to 46% of time during the appraisal step and up to 91% during the contract signature step**(see paragraph 3.3.3 for more information), representing the **two most burdensome steps** of the selection process.
- **Interoperability** also reduces times, and, in particular, external interoperability allows for **saving 41% of time during the appraisal step** for the calls in the sample that can benefit from this functionality, compared to the calls that cannot benefit or can benefit only to a limited extent from it.

This step covers submission of applications to the MA/IBs. It also covers administrative compliance checks and preparing necessary data for the following steps in the appraisal process.

We collected data on the IT systems that are available for the submission and processing of applications. Furthermore, data on the satisfaction of beneficiaries with the submission

procedures and the main types of problems that occurred during the submission and processing step were gathered.

The full list of data collected through the checklists is provided in the following table.

**Table 9. List of data collected for step 6**

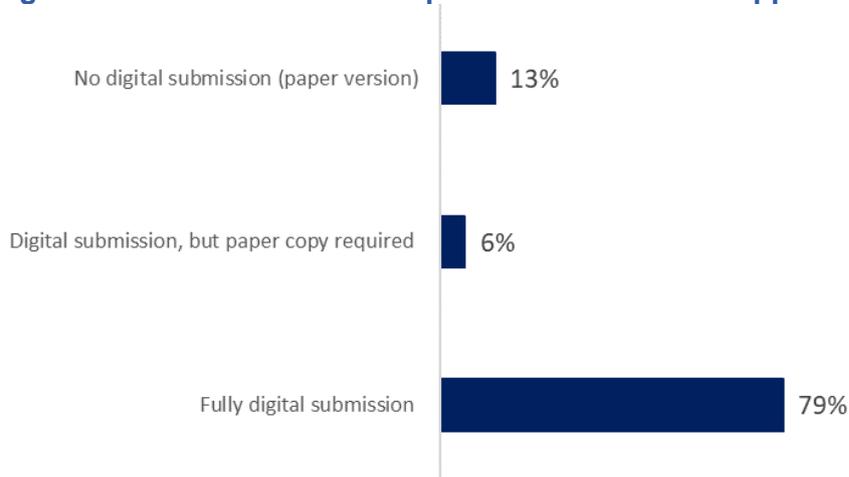
Variable	Unit of measurement
6.1 Is there a possibility to submit an application digitally and without providing paper copies?	Yes/no
6.2 How can applications be submitted digitally?	Multiple choice
6.3 Which automated support & controls are available during digital submission?	Multiple
6.4 To what extent are applicants happy with the digital submission of applications.	Likert scale (1-5)
6.5 Types of problems related to the submission of applications reported by MA/IB	Multiple choice
6.6 To what extent digital submission tools are linked to other digital tools used for communication & appraisal of the application?	Likert scale (1-5)
6.7 To what extent are digital submission tools are linked to other platforms/databases (e.g. public registers)	Likert scale (1-5)

### IT tools for submission of applications

During workshops with national experts, the MAs/IBs indicated whether the submission of applications is fully or partially digitalised. These data were integrated with information from desk research.

As shown in Figure 63 below, overall, 85% of the sample or 74 calls in total have used at least partially digital application systems in place, with 79% providing fully digital applications.

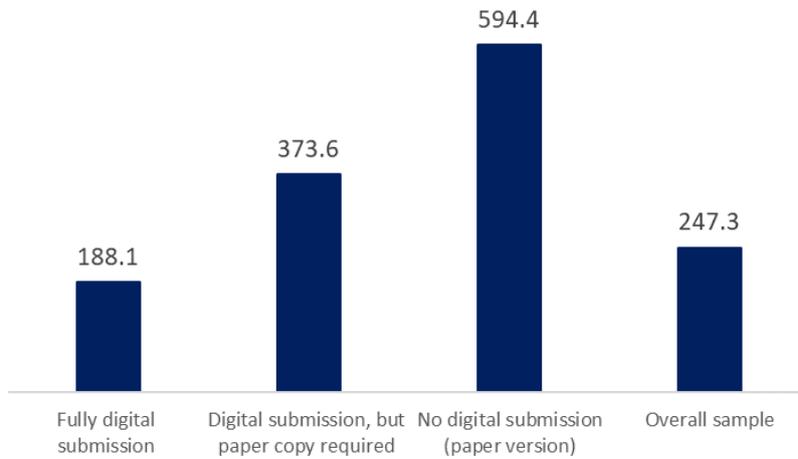
**Figure 63. Extent to which it is possible to submit an application digitally (N=81)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Digitalisation of the submission phase is a certainly to be considered as a good practice as it allows for saving a substantial amount of time. In fact, the figure below shows that for the calls who relied on paper submissions the submission phase lasted almost three times longer than calls who had a fully digital submission process. Even the submission phase of the calls who had digital submission systems in place but required paper copies of application documents lasted on average longer than calls with fully digitalised submission of applications. There seems to be a clear relationship between the duration of the submission of the proposals and the degree to which the submission of applications is digitalised, hinting at potential efficiency gains of digitalising the submission of applications.

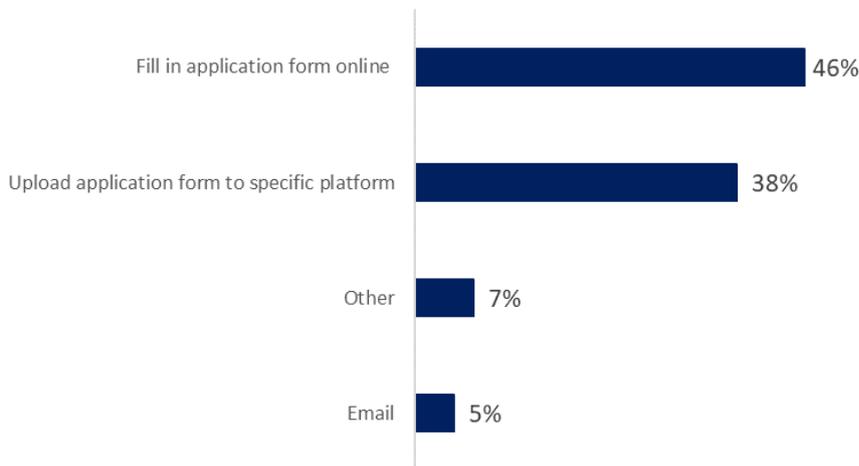
**Figure 64. Average duration of the submission phase in calendar days by degree of digitalisation of submission process (N=85)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

As regards the specific tools that were used to submit applications online, multiple answers were possible. Data are available for 76 calls (85% of the sample) that have at least partially digitalised tools for submitting applications. Most digital application systems rely on online application platforms where applicants can fill out forms or upload their application documents (see Figure below). Only in 5% of the calls, emails were used for submitting applications. In the calls where other tools were used to submit applications digitally, these refer to existing data exchange systems not specific to ERDF.

**Figure 65. Frequency of use of digital tools (N=76)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

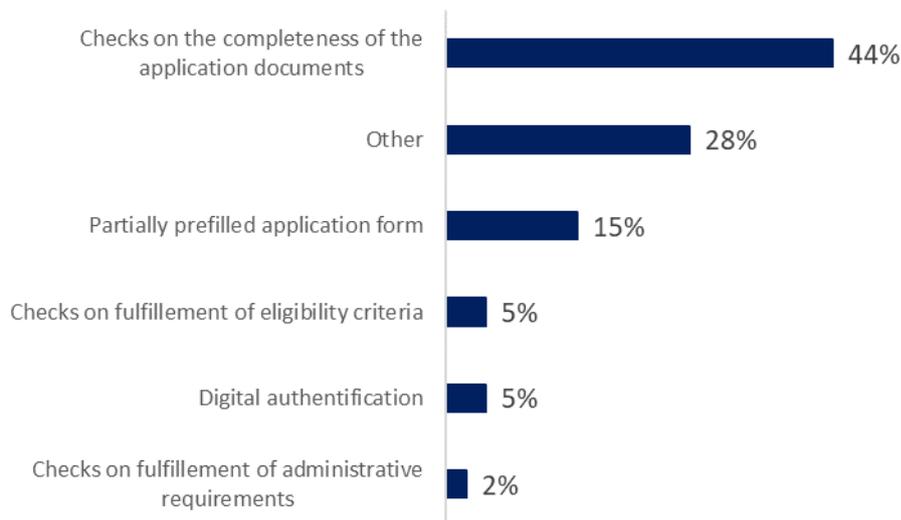
Information on the automated support and control functions of digital application systems was collected for 69 calls (79% of the sample), on the basis of desk research and/or workshops with MAs/IBs. Multiple answers were possible, and these are reported in Figure 66. For almost half of the sampled calls checks on the completeness of the application documents were carried out. In

the category “other” tools for automated support & control functions, the following tools were mentioned:

- Automated notifications during filling out online forms on missing or incorrect information
- Digital authentication
- Automated prefilled application form based on forms submitted for previous calls

Especially the tool of digital authentication was used in many of the calls that selected the “other” category.

**Figure 66. Share of calls that make use of tools for automated support & controls (N=69)**



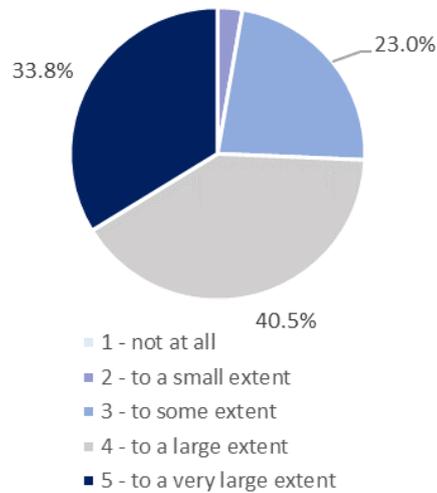
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Applicants' assessment of the submission process

The extent to which applicants were happy with the digital submission process was filled in by national experts on the basis of focus group discussions and interviews with beneficiaries and applicants. The assessment was done on a scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“to a very large extent”).

Data is available for 74 calls (85% of the sample) and is reported in Figure 67. The average score is 3.9, indicating an overall positive judgement. Indeed, almost 75% of applicants were satisfied with the submission process at least to a large extent. Only in the case of a Slovakian call, applicants were not satisfied (or happy to a small extent) with the digital submission of proposals, due to technical problems with the online application platform.

**Figure 67. Extent to which applicants are happy with the digital submission of applications (N=74)**



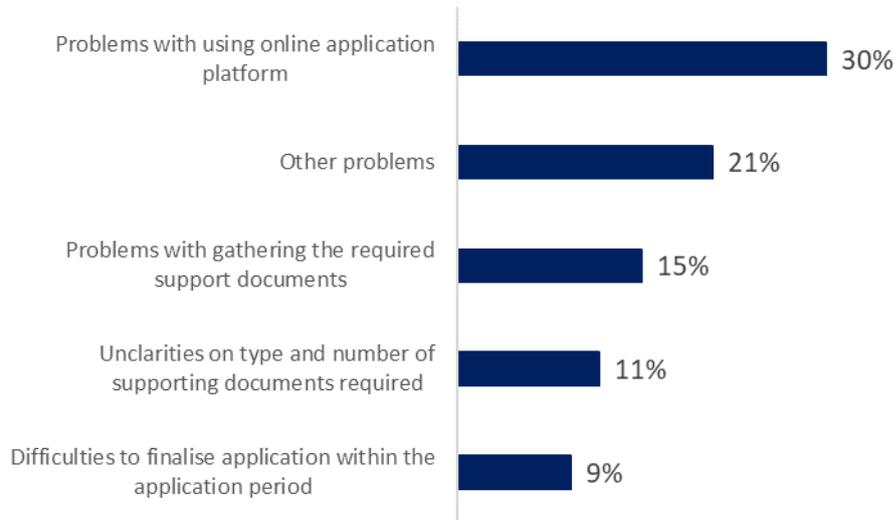
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### **Types of problems related to the submission of applications reported by MA/IBs**

Information on types of problems was collected during the workshops with MAs/IBs. Multiple selection was possible, and data is available for 58 calls (66% of the sample). The results on categorised types of problems are presented in Figure 68.

For 45% of the calls, problems with the online application platform were reported, making it the most prominent issue encountered. Problems related to the supporting documents were reported less frequently (22%). Other types of problems, which were mentioned in 31% of the calls, can be concisely grouped as follows:

- Problems related to accessibility of online platforms
- Problems with digitalising documents
- Inconsistencies in the application forms

**Figure 68. Frequency of problems related to the submission of applications reported by MA/IBs (N=58)**

Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

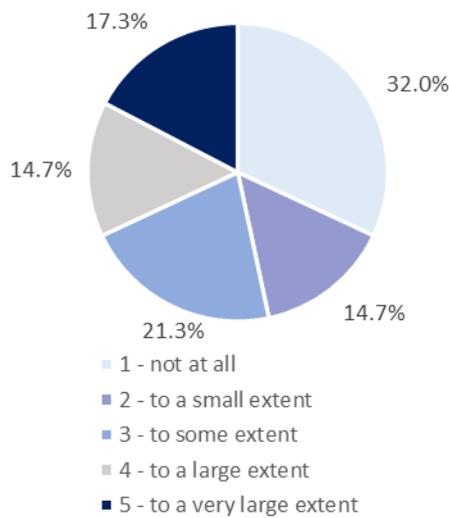
### Interoperability of online application platforms

On the basis of desk research and workshops with MAs/IBs, national experts indicated to what extent digital tools for submitting applications are linked to other tools used for communication and appraisal of applications (Figure 69), and to other platforms and databases such as public registers (Figure 70). The assessment of the degree of interoperability was done by the national experts on a scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“to a very large extent”) on the basis of the information collected from the MA/IBs.

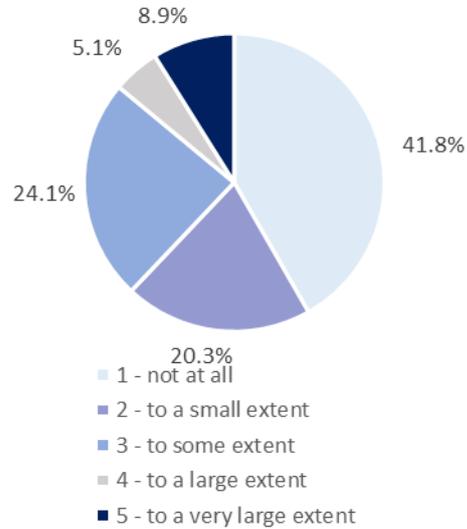
Data on the interoperability with other digital tools was available for 75 calls (86% of the sample). With an average score of 2.7, the interoperability was assessed to be rather low. Tools like online authentication via online banking accounts or similar were mentioned often by those calls in which online application platforms were judged to be interoperable with other online platforms.

As regards interoperability with other platforms/databases (e.g. public registers), data was available for 79 calls (90% of the sample). With an average score of 2.2, also in this case the interoperability was assessed as even lower than the interoperability with other tools. In some calls, online platforms were linked to applications submitted to previous calls for proposals, thus applicants did not have to fill out all the required information twice.

**Figure 69. Extent to which digital submission tools are linked to other digital tools used for communication & appraisal of the applications (N=75)**



**Figure 70. Extent to which digital submission tools are linked to other platforms/databases (e.g. public registers) (N=79)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

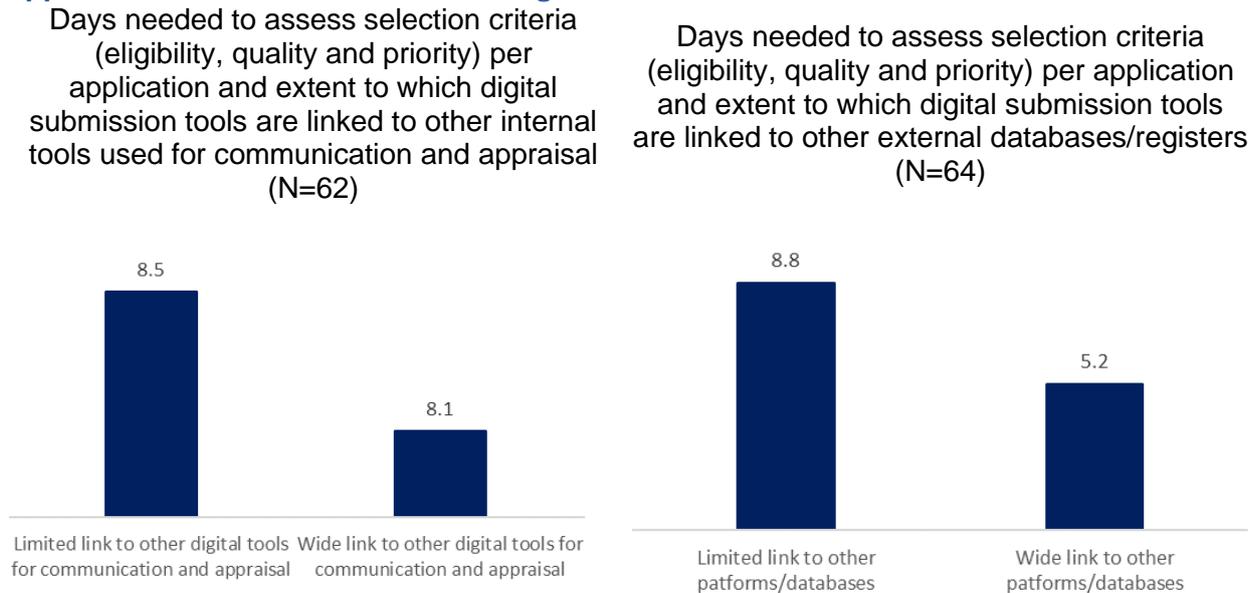
These findings can be expected as interoperability with internal and external systems/databases represents a challenge and requires a substantial investment, in financial terms, technical skills and adaptation to regulatory issues related to data privacy. Nonetheless, the digitalisation of the entire selection process, from the submission of application until the contract signature, could bring substantial benefits in terms of reduced errors, enhanced transparency, improved communication and reduced length of the selection process (especially as regards the phases of proposal evaluation and contract signature which are the most burdensome).

The digitalisation of the submission of applications does not only reduce the time needed to carry out this phase but can also substantially reduce the time needed to carry out the proposal evaluation phase. In fact, as shown in the figure below, when internal IT systems are interlinked (e.g. the tools for submitting applications are interoperable with those used for the appraisals and for communication), the time needed to assess the selection criteria is lower. Although the time saved for one application (approx. half day) may seem limited, this time saving becomes significant when a large number of proposals need to be assessed.

The figure below shows also that interoperability with external databases and registers allows to save 3.5 days per application during the proposal evaluation phase, shortening considerably the amount of time needed to assess both the eligibility and quality/priority criteria. This happens because interoperability with external databases/registers may allow for the automatic check of some eligibility criteria and documents and, in some cases, double-funding as in the Portuguese IT system. Interoperability is an advantage for applicants when IT tools prefill the applications on the basis of the information automatically collected from other sources.



**Figure 71. Relation between the time needed to assess selection criteria for one application and the extent to which digital submission tools are interlinked**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### 3.2.6. Appraisal of proposals and selection of projects (step 7)

#### Key findings

- **The appraisal of proposals is the most demanding step** of the selection process. It requires the most **significant effort in terms of FTE days (195)**. Closed-ended competitive calls (220 FTE days), characterised by a greater focus on quality criteria, require the highest number of FTE days. Much lower FTE days are needed in open-ended competitive calls (107) and direct award procedures (55).
- **The appraisal step lasts, on average, 278.3 calendar days.** The duration **ranges** from a **minimum of 26 days**, for direct award call, to a **maximum of 1,014 days** or more than three years for open-ended competitive call.
- The average number of persons involved per call is approx. 30 on average. It ranges between 12 (in direct awards) to 33 people (in closed-ended calls); it is 20 in open-ended calls, on average.
- This step of the selection process is also the **most outsourced**. When looking at the entire sample, on average, the share of internal personnel is similar (52%) to the **share of external people (48%)**. However, calls under TO1 and TO2 usually need scientific and technical skills to appraise proposals and use a higher share of external experts (up to 69%).
- On average, evaluating eligibility as well as quality and priority criteria requires 4.1 days per application.
- Setting up an **Evaluation Committee is a common practice** throughout the examined case. However, it is **challenging** for authorities to **involve internal personnel** in a timely manner and, when necessary, **recruit external experts** with the appropriate expertise.
- In our sample, an Evaluation Committee was set up by the MA or IB in 68 out of 86 calls. Typically, when there is no Evaluation Committee, it is because a direct award procedure is used. In most cases, **at least two committee members evaluate each**

**application** to avoid bias. Some Evaluation Committees also organise an explanatory meeting to ensure the consistent assessment of the criteria.

- There is **significant room for improving** the appraisal of proposals and the selection of operations by **fostering digitalisation**. E-solutions to support the appraisal process are still not widely used. Less than half of the analysed calls use IT tools in the selection process. The time needed to assess the quality and priority criteria per application is the lowest for the calls for which the proposal evaluation is already digitalised and automated.

This step of the selection process covers the appraisal of the proposals and the actual selection of project. The data on this step gathered through the checklists are listed in the following table.

**Table 10. List of data collected for step 7**

Variable	Unit of measurement
7.1 Total persons involved	Number of people
7.2 of whom: internal officials	Number of people
7.3 of whom: external personnel (TA or experts)	Number of people
7.4 Number of full-time working days required to the involved personnel	Number of full-time working days
7.5 Average time needed to evaluate all eligibility criteria per application in days	Number of days
7.6 Average time needed to evaluate all quality and priority criteria per project in days	Number of days
7.7 Average time needed for selection process (if selection is separate from evaluation of applications) in days	Number of days
7.8 Description of evaluation process (key steps, role of evaluation committee and decision making)	Qualitative description
7.9 Was a committee (or similar) created for the evaluation of proposals? What was a composition of this committee?	Yes/No
7.10 Time needed to set-up the evaluation committee (in days)	Number of days
7.11 Number of members of the evaluation committee	Number of people
7.12 Number of external assessors in the evaluation committee	Number of people
7.13 Were there written guidance documents (e.g. unified evaluation strategy or checklists with the detailed description of the evaluation process)?	Yes/No
7.14 Was there a training for the evaluators?	Yes/No
7.15 Did the same team analyse the eligibility and the quality criteria? If not, please describe the different setting.	Yes/No
7.16 How many persons were tasked to evaluate one proposal?	Number of people
7.17 Was there parallel evaluation by more persons to avoid bias?	Yes/No
7.18 Were there clarification questions sent to the applicants and was there a unified practice on the clarification requests (e.g. on which issues a clarification was requested on and in which case the missing information lead to the rejection)?	Yes/No
7.19 How many clarification requests have been sent?	Number of requests
7.20 How did the overall clarification process impact the overall evaluation timeframe?	1-5 Likert scale
7.21 How many sessions of the committee were needed to complete the selection?	Number of sessions
7.22 How is the selection decision taken by the evaluation panel?	Qualitative description
7.23 Description of IT solutions used to support evaluation process.	Qualitative description
7.24 Problems occurred during evaluation/selection process as reported by MA/IB	Qualitative description
7.25 Problems occurred during evaluation/selection process as reported by Audit authority for this call (if any)	Qualitative description

<b>7.26</b>	Number of projects rejected due to failing to meet the eligibility criteria	Number of projects
<b>7.27</b>	Is there a minimum score of applications required to be selected?	Yes/No
<b>7.28</b>	Number of applications which did not reach the minimum score to be selected (if any)	Number of applications

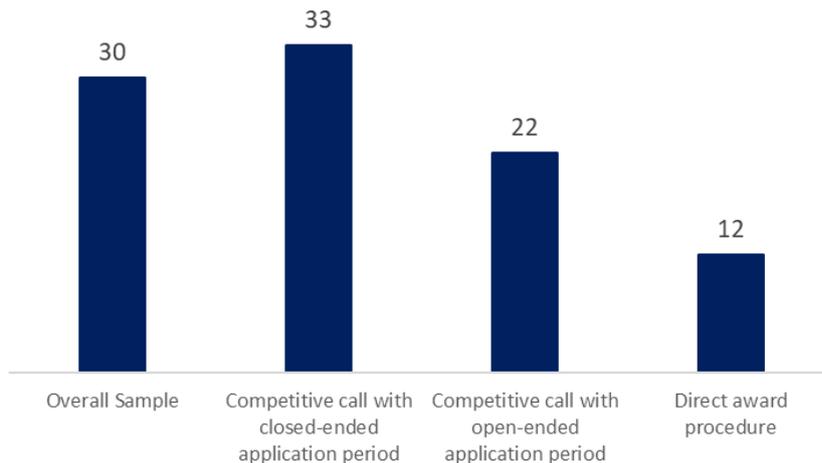
In addition to the above variables, a number of indicators were calculated to identify similarities and differences among practices in relation to selecting and contracting of operations.

**Human resources involved in the selection**

On average approx. 30 persons per call are involved in this step of the selection. In competitive calls with a closed-ended application period, the average number of people involved is 33, while in open-ended calls, it is on average smaller (20), so it is in direct award procedures (12). This might be due to the fact that closed-ended calls receive all the applications in a defined interval of time, implying that the proposal evaluation efforts are concentrated. On the contrary, competitive open-ended calls receive applications on a rolling basis during a wider time frame and evaluation of applications also takes place on a rolling basis. Therefore, open-ended calls may need a smaller number of human resources to evaluate the applications. In general, direct awards seem to be less “resource intensive” in terms of personnel, probably due to the relatively small number of applications to be analysed.

It must be noted, though, that the variability across calls can be high and, in some cases, the number of persons involved can differ significantly from the average. For example, a call launched in the context of the OP Sicily involved a number of personnel (374 people) much higher than the average. This is due to the nature of the call (support to technological change in enterprises through pilot lines and large-scale demonstration projects) which required recruiting 359 external evaluators to evaluate the proposals. Other cases of involvement of a high number of personnel are also linked to the need for recruiting external evaluators.

**Figure 72. Average number of human resources involved in step 7 by type of call (N=82)**

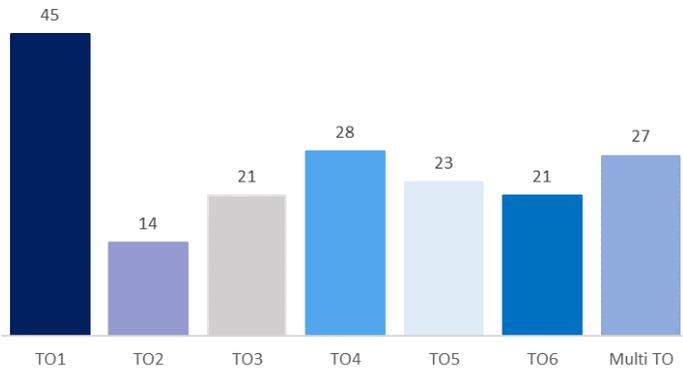


Note: The number of personnel includes: internal personnel and external personnel involved in step 7.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Across Thematic Objectives, the number of people involved varies, as in the following graph, from a minimum of 14 on average in TO2 to a maximum of 45 in TO1. This may reflect greater complexity of selection of projects in some TOs such as research and innovation (TO1) and, though to a lesser extent, in initiatives aimed at supporting the shift towards a low-carbon

economy (TO4) which may consist of support for energy efficiency (in public infrastructure, enterprises etc.) as well as promotion of renewable energy sources, just to name a few.

**Figure 73. Average number of human resources involved in step 7 by TO (N=81)**

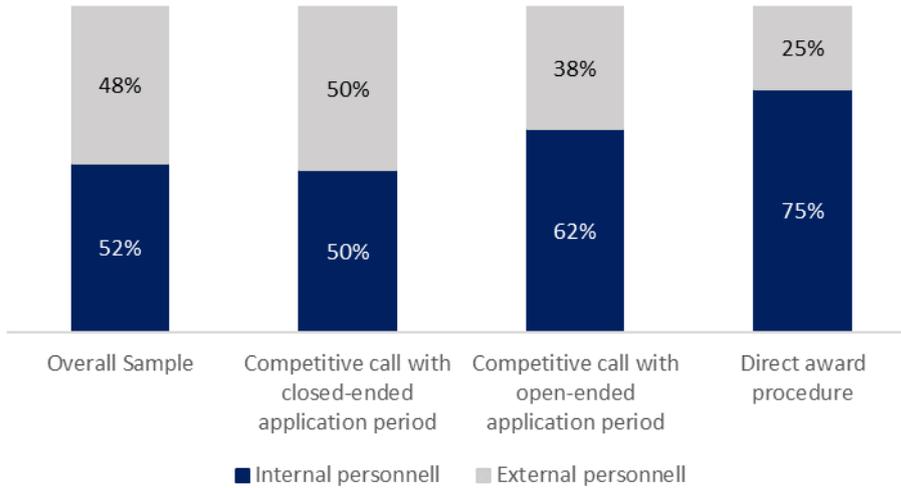


Note: The number of personnel includes: internal personnel and external personnel involved in step 7. TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The number of persons involved in step 7 include both internal and external human resources. Internal human resources, working on the selection of proposals, are mostly those, from the OP management and control system (MA/IB); while external human resources are those outside the OP management and control system (e.g. external sectoral experts, external evaluators, technical assistance team etc.).

When looking at entire sample, on average the share of internal (52%) and external (48%) personell involved is quite balanced. However, when splitting the sample by type of calls, differences in the use of external human resources can be spotted across samples. In both competitive calls with open-ended application period and direct awards, the use of external experts is limited, as only respectively 30% and 25% of the personell involved in step 7 is external. On the contrary, competitive calls with closed-ended application period show higher concentration of external experts (50%). This might be explained by the fact that, as shown in Figure 72, closed-ended competitive calls tend to be more human resource intensive and the MA/IB could compensate the lack of internal personell with external resources (e.g. technical assistance). The need for higher number of human resources could also be explained by the fact that, while opend-ended competitive calls and direct awards tend to focus more on eligibility, closed-ended competitive calls are focused more on quality criteria that usually are more burdensome and complex to evaluate and could require some technical skills not readily available within the MA/IB.

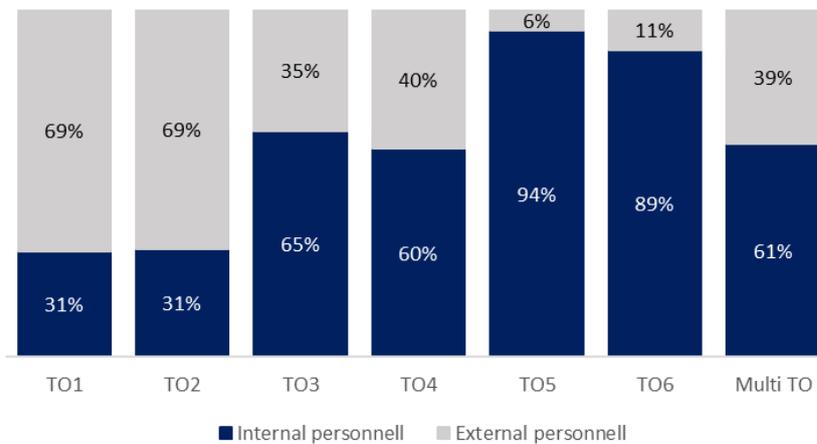
**Figure 74. Share of internal/external personnel in step 7 by type of call (N=81)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The situation as regards share of internal vs. external personnel is varied across TOs. External personnel prevail in TO1 and TO2 while they have a minority share in the other TOs. Again, this might be linked to call complexity, as for example calls under TO1 tend to be more complex and technical, and might require the recruitment of external evaluators with relevant technical skills that could not be found within the MA personnel. An analysis of the involvement of external evaluators is provided in the next paragraph.

**Figure 75. Share of internal/external personnel in step 7 by type of call (N=80)**



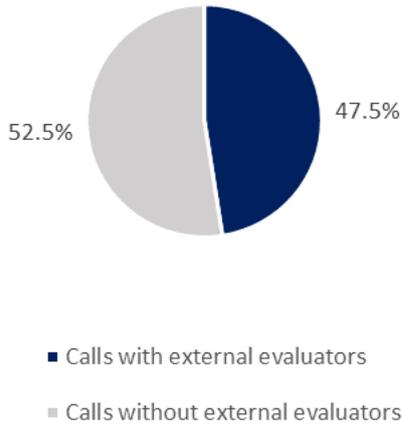
Note: TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Involvement of external evaluators

In our database, we are able to isolate the external evaluators from the external personnel. External evaluators are the external experts recruited specifically to evaluate the received applications. Information on whether or not the call makes use of external evaluators is available for 61 calls (around 70% of our sample). Out of these 61 calls, 29 were supported by external evaluators, while 32 did not recruit any external evaluator. As shown in Figure 76, further breaking down the sample by TO and type of calls leads to subsamples with too few observations to extrapolate statistically significant conclusions. Despite this, the analysis at TO level in Figure 76

clearly shows that the vast majority of the calls under TO1 & TO2 make use of external evaluators/experts, this can be justified by the fact that the assessment of the applications for this TO usually need specific scientific and technical skills.

**Figure 76. Number of calls with or without external evaluators for the overall sample (bar chart), by type of call and TO (table) (N=61)**



	Calls with external evaluators	Calls without external evaluators
<b>Type of call</b>		
Competitive call with closed-ended application period	25	28
Competitive call with open-ended application period	2	2
Direct award procedure	2	2
<b>Thematic Objective</b>		
TO1	11	5
TO2	1	1
TO3	3	9
TO4	5	5
TO5	1	1
TO6	1	3
TO8	0	1
Multi TO	7	7

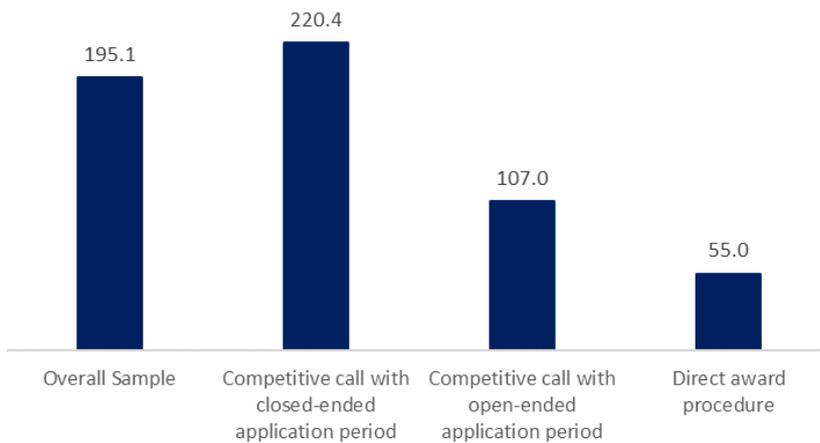
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Time and effort needed to evaluate applications

The effort needed to evaluate applications has been assessed through collecting the number of full-time working days (FTE days) needed to the personnel to carry out step 7. The estimation of this indicator has been particularly complex for the authorities and, due to this, there is large volatility in the collected data. The volatility makes it particularly challenging to analyse the data, however, some coherent patterns can be identified.

As shown in Figure 77, competitive calls with closed-ended period require on average 220,4 FTE days to carry out step 7, while much lower FTE days are needed in the case of open-ended competitive calls (107). This confirms that the appraisal of closed-ended competitive calls require a greater effort, on average, probably due to the higher focus on quality criteria and complexity of the calls. On the other hand, direct awards show the lowest average number of FTE days (55).

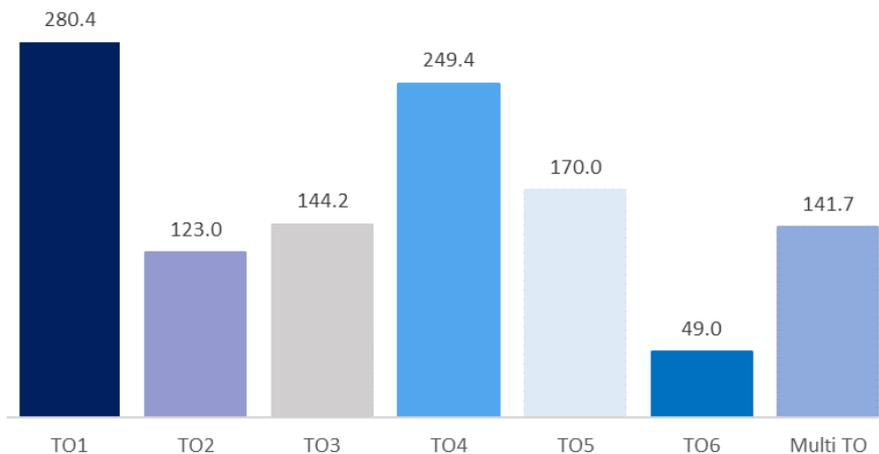
**Figure 77. Average number of FTE days needed to carry out step 7 by type of call (N=69)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The situation varies greatly across TOs. The greatest effort is required for calls under TO1, TO4 and TO5. This seems coherent with what was highlighted in Figure 73, where TO1, TO4 and TO5 showed the highest use of human resources. The reason for this could still be the mentioned higher complexity of calls financed under these TOs.

**Figure 78. Average number of FTE days needed to carry out step 7 by TO (N=68)**



Note: TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation.

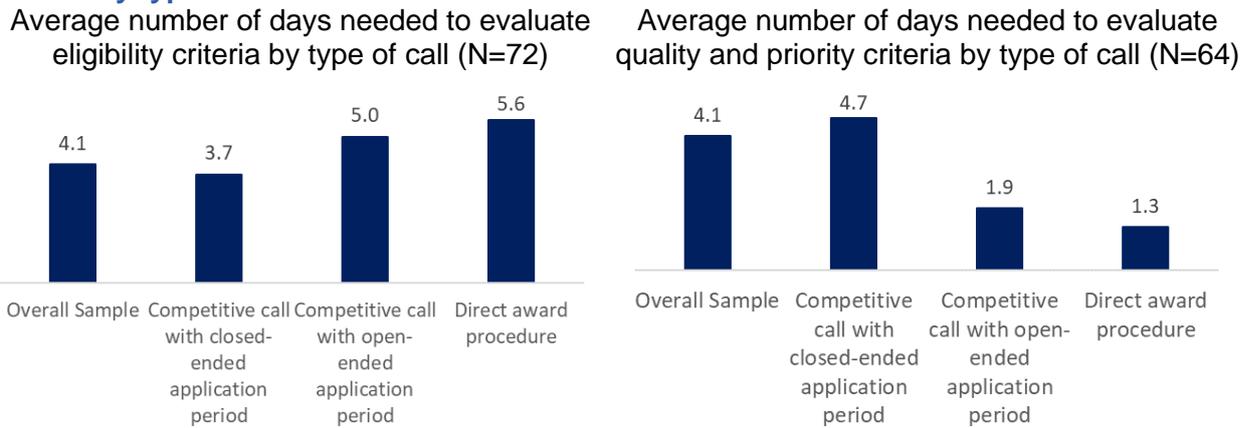
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

While it seems that some patterns and coherence across data can be drawn, as already stated, we recorded high volatility in FTE days data. The calls showing the highest FTE days ( $\geq 800$ ) are all related to TO1 except for one which is related to TO4. The main reasons behind these high values may lie in the difficulties in assessing the criteria as well as excessive documents to be checked.

In addition to the total effort needed to run step 7, through the checklists we also collect data on the time needed to check the eligibility, quality and priority criteria as well as the time needed for the selection of the evaluated projects in calls where the selection does not coincide with the proposal evaluation. This is the case, for example, whereby the evaluation of the applications is run by a team while the selection is done by a different team/committee.

When splitting the entire samples by type of calls, a few interesting patterns emerge. First of all, while for competitive calls with closed-ended application period the evaluation of quality and priority criteria is more time consuming than the evaluation of eligibility criteria (when looking at a single application), the reverse is true for open-ended competitive calls. This might be explained by the fact that while usually open-ended competitive calls focus on the evaluation of proposals on a rolling basis, mostly on the basis of eligibility criteria and only to a smaller extent on a limited amount of simple quality and priority criteria, the proposal evaluation of closed-ended competitive calls usually focus on a high number and at time complex quality and priority criteria. Direct award procedures show the highest number of days needed to check the eligibility criteria (5.6) but, also, the lowest time needed to evaluate quality and priority criteria (1.3).

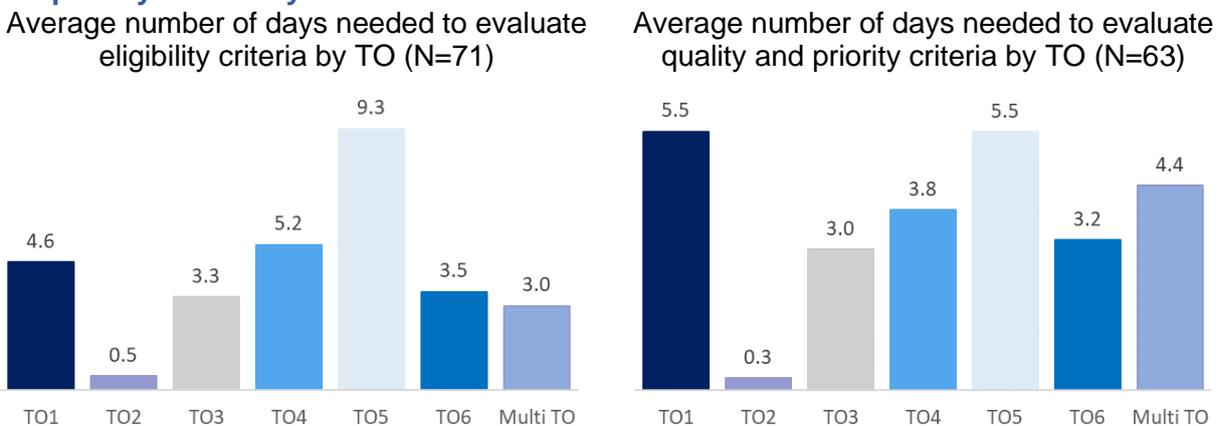
**Figure 79. Average number of days (per application) to check eligibility, quality and priority criteria by type of call**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The situation is varied across TOs. The highest number of days needed to evaluate eligibility criteria is recorded under TO5, where, on average, 9.3 days are needed to analyse eligibility criteria for one application. This is followed by calls under TO4 (5.2) and TO1 (4.6). While the highest number of days needed to evaluate quality and priority criteria is recorded under TO1 and TO5, where on average around 5.5 days are needed for one application and multi TOs (4.4). This is in line with the results on the FTE reported in Figure 78.

**Figure 80. Average number of days (per application) needed to evaluate eligibility, quality and priority criteria by TO**



Note: TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

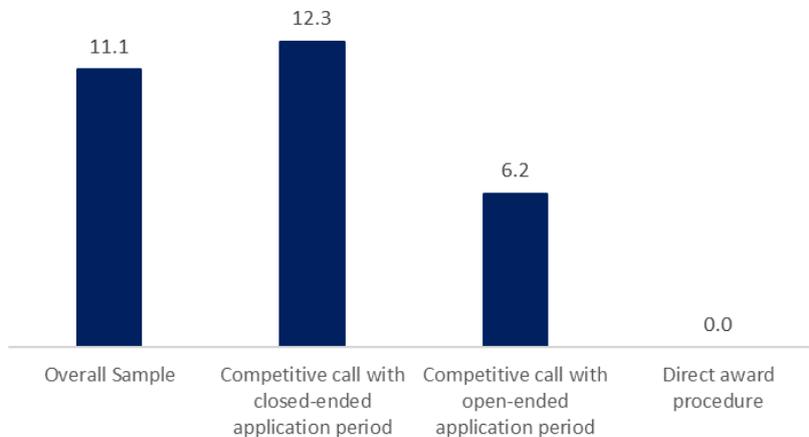


Overall, the numbers of days needed to evaluate eligibility, quality and priority criteria for a single application also vary across type of calls. In two cases, the days needed to check the eligibility criteria is 0 or almost zero. This is due to the fact the eligibility criteria were very few (just 1 or two) and mainly linked to the sector of operation of the company or the membership to certain associations. The highest number of days needed to evaluate eligibility criteria per application (around 20 days) was reported by calls suffering from low clarity of the administrative and eligibility requirements that slew down the proposal evaluation.

The time needed to evaluate the quality and priority criteria per application is the lowest for the calls for which the evaluation of the quality criteria is already digitalised and automated as in the case of some calls from the Greek, Portuguese and Cypriot OPs. On the contrary, the highest number of days needed to analyse the quality and priority criteria per application is recorded for the calls for which methodological guidelines are vague or not sufficiently precise and exhaustive, this resulted in the need for discussing several ambiguous cases among the evaluators leading to lengthy proposal evaluation processes.

In some cases, the selection of the operations is a separate process from the proposal evaluation. In our sample this happened for 33 calls (around 40% of the total competitive calls). As expected, for direct awards there is not a selection separated from the proposal evaluation, which is in line with the nature of this type of calls. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 81, closed-ended competitive calls take on average 12.3 days to select the projects after the proposal evaluation while for open-ended competitive calls 6.2 days are needed on average. This might be linked to the fact that while open-ended calls focus mostly on eligibility criteria which usually leaves less room for interpretation, closed-ended focus mainly on more complex quality criteria which in some cases could lead to further discussions during the selection phase.

**Figure 81. Average number of days needed to select one application by type of call (N=33)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The analysis per TO for this variable is not provided since, due to the very low number of observations, it would not be meaningful to further split the sample by TOs.

### **The proposal appraisal (or proposal evaluation<sup>16</sup>) process**

Usually, applications (project proposals) are going first through an administrative check, then there is an eligibility check and finally an evaluation of project's quality. In most cases, at least two members of committee are evaluating each application and the head of the committee is signing decisions. The most common practice is that the administrative and eligibility check is done internally by the MA/IB based on the checklists which are following the requirements from the CFP and Guidelines for Applicants. In exceptional cases, external experts can be also engaged to assist the eligibility check if the MA/IB needs a second opinion on e.g. legal issues, ownership structure and state-aid related issues.

For the evaluation of the proposal quality, in the majority of cases, external experts are involved. These have specific technical expertise which would be very difficult (or impossible) to find within the OP management and control system itself, such as construction experts, energy experts, environmental experts, digital experts, etc. Usually the external experts also sign the confidentiality agreement and the declaration of the absence of conflict of interest. For the evaluation of the quality of the project proposal, there is usually a pre-defined grid with the indication of how to define the scores per each criterion. Some Evaluation Committees also have a proposal evaluation workshop or meeting to ensure the consistent application of the criteria to the project proposals. In few cases (DE, ES OPs) once the administrative and eligibility criteria are met, the MA/IB cooperates with the applicant to finalize the application – this is the case mostly with the industry/business applicants and their projects are contributing to the regional economy (the cases are from the regional OPs). Joint efforts are then made to improve the quality of the proposal and maximize its impact and sustainability.

In the Alpine space OP we have encountered a 2 step selection procedure. In this case, first applicants submit a short project description and then, if this is shortlisted, a full project application is submitted. A similar practice is found in SI, in the call supporting the start-ups, where there was a preselection stage and only the selected candidates were invited to submit the full application.

There are also differences between analysed cases in how applications are treated after submission. In some cases such as in CY OP, missing administrative documents are reason for exclusion (administrative check), while in other cases (e.g. AT, EE, HR, SI OPs) applicants are contacted in order to amend their application by submitting the missing documents (no changes in the content of their application is allowed). Nevertheless, the proposal evaluation process in most cases allows for contacting the applicant and asking for clarifications or missing supporting documents – this is to minimize the rejections based on the missing information and not on the quality of the project proposal.

### **Evaluation Committee**

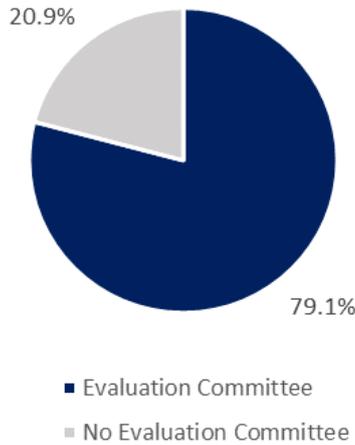
The Evaluation Committee was set up for the vast majority of the calls in our sample: 68 of the 86 calls for which we have the information on the Committee. Almost all of the closed-ended competitive calls (60 out of 67) and direct awards procedures (5 out of 6) set up an Evaluation Committee while the majority of open-ended calls did not set it up.

As shown in Figure 82 **Error! Reference source not found.**, when exploring the sample by TOs, no significant difference can be detected among TOs, showing that the TO does not influence the decision on whether to set up an Evaluation Committee or not. Indeed, this decision seems to be influenced mostly by the type of call and the OP. For example, for the OP Alpine Space no Evaluation Committee is set up since officers of the MA evaluate the applications while the Monitoring Committee selects the successful applications. In other cases, there were evaluators, external or internal to the MA, who have been involved in evaluating the proposals, without forming a specific committee.

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<sup>16</sup> Throughout the report, proposal appraisal and proposal evaluation are used as synonyms. The word evaluation in the present study is always referred to the appraisal of proposals or projects, or to the assessment of selection criteria (e.g. evaluation of eligibility, quality and priority criteria). It is worth noting that the word evaluation is never referred, in the context of this study, to policy evaluation.

**Figure 82. Number of calls with or without an Evaluation Committee, by call type and TO**  
 Number of calls with or without Evaluation Committee (N=86)      Number of calls with or without an Evaluation Committee by call type and TO (N=60)

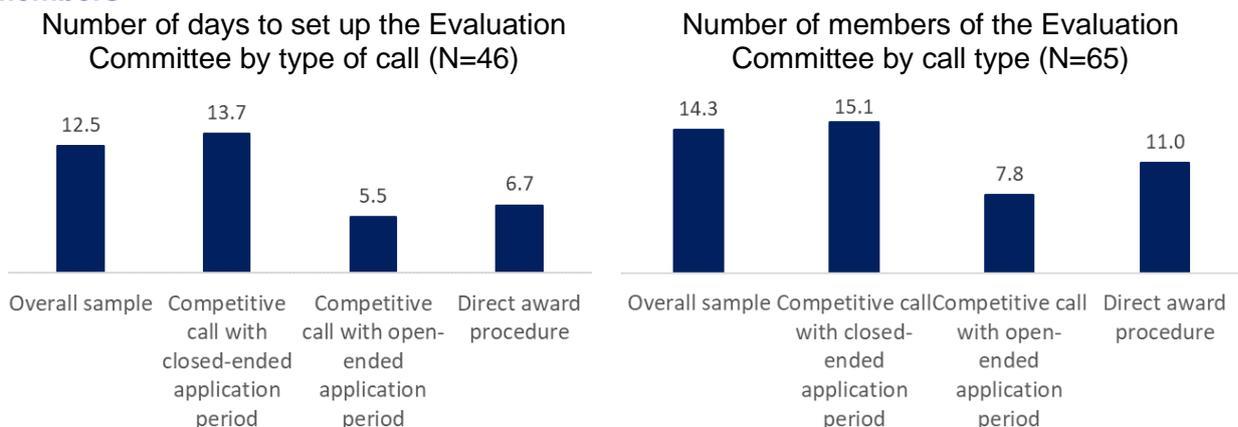


	Calls with Evaluation Committee	Calls without Evaluation Committee
<b>Type of call</b>		
Competitive call with closed-ended application period	58	7
Competitive call with open-ended application period	5	10
Direct award procedure	5	1
<b>Thematic Objective</b>		
TO1	17	2
TO2	3	0
TO3	12	1
TO4	11	6
TO5	2	1
TO6	5	0
TO8	1	0
Multi TO	17	8

Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

On average, 13.7 days were needed to set up the Evaluation Committee for closed-ended competitive calls, 5.5 days for open-ended competitive calls and 6.7 days for direct awards. It seems that higher number of days needed to set up the Evaluation Committee are related to a higher number of members of the Committee.

**Figure 83. Average number of days to set up the Evaluation Committee and number of members**

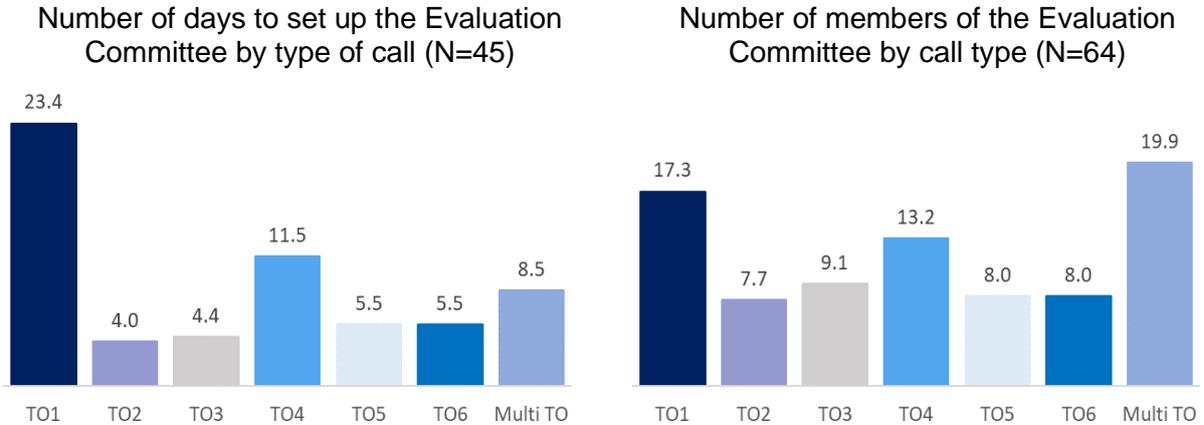


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Setting up an Evaluation Committee requires the selection of personnel (internal or external) with the right set of skills. This is why for highly complex calls, that require profiles with different technical skills, as for example for calls under TO1, TO4 and multi TOs, setting up the Committee

requires on average more time than for other TOs, as well as a higher number of members is required.

**Figure 84. Average number of days to set up the Evaluation Committee and number of members**

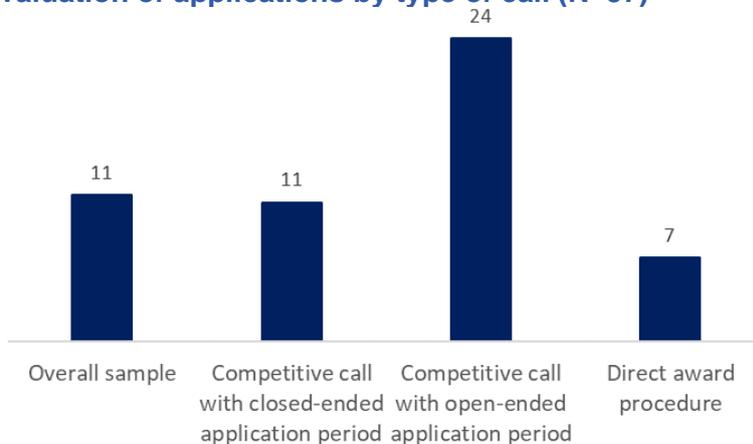


Note: TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Setting up the Evaluation Committee was particularly burdensome for the calls for which a large number of external experts needed to be recruited. For example, in one of the cases, where 359 external evaluators were recruited, 160 days were needed to set up the Committee. A similar situation has been encountered by one of the calls where 120 days were necessary. In both cases, the OP encountered some issues in recruiting the external evaluators, mostly due to administrative and bureaucratic issues. Furthermore, even when external evaluators are not involved, setting up the Evaluation Committee can be lengthier than on average. For example, in another call analysed, 60 days were needed to set up the Committee since it was particularly complex to find internal personnel with the right set of technical skills needed for the call.

Open-ended competitive calls show, on average, the highest number of meetings of the Evaluation Committee needed to finalise the evaluation of the application (24). This is justified by the fact that under open-ended competitive calls, applications are evaluated on a rolling basis while for the other type of calls the proposal evaluation effort is more concentrated. Direct award procedures show the lowest number of meetings needed (7) as, usually, direct awards focus on a relatively small number of applications.

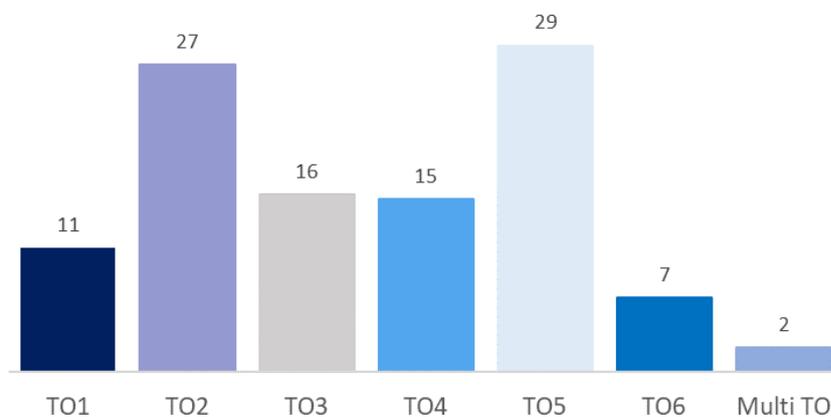
**Figure 85. Average number of meetings of the Evaluation Committee to finalise the evaluation of applications by type of call (N=57)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The low number of observations makes it difficult to draw conclusions on the data when distinguishing among TOs. The highest number of meetings of the Evaluation Committee were needed for TO5, however, since for TO5 only two observations are available, this number reflects mainly the situation of a specific call in relation to which 56 meetings were organised (TO2 shows a similar data issue). Overall, the highest number of meetings needed to carry out the proposal evaluation in our sample (79) was due to the high number of applications received and the high number of selection criteria. A few other calls show high number of meetings. The reasons behind the large numbers of meeting were: vague evaluation criteria with not a clear definition of the methodology to be used to estimate and assess the criteria, which caused discussions within the committee on how to evaluate the proposals, therefore, leading to longer times; large number of criteria to be checked and high volume of applications received.

**Figure 86. Average number of meetings of the Evaluation Committee needed to finalise the evaluation of applications by TOs (N=56)**



Note: TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Appraisal of the applications

On average, each proposal was evaluated by approx. 5 people. The number of people tasked to evaluate one proposal differ greatly across calls (from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 23). These differences may be related to various aspects. Sometimes, the complexity of a call may play a role but, often, it is the internal organisation to influence significantly these statistics. For example, in Sweden the entire Evaluation Committee evaluates each proposal and in Italy (OP Sicily), while the whole Evaluation Committee evaluates quality and priority criteria, other personnel from the MA, external to the committee, evaluates the eligibility criteria.

For 64% of the calls for which we have available data, the same team analysed all the criteria, while for the remaining 36% of the calls the analysis of the criteria was conducted by different teams. For the vast majority of the calls included in our sample (77%) parallel proposal evaluation was carried out to avoid bias.

For 88% of 83 calls for which this data is available, written guidance documents (e.g., unified proposal evaluation strategy or checklists with the detailed description of the evaluation process) were provided. In some cases, the calls for which written guidance was not provided encountered some issues during the proposal evaluation phase related to lack of clarity on the methodology to be used to assess the criteria or difficult in interpreting them, delaying the proposal evaluation. In other cases, the lack of written guidance documents did not represent an issue since similar calls were already launched and similar procedures were already used.

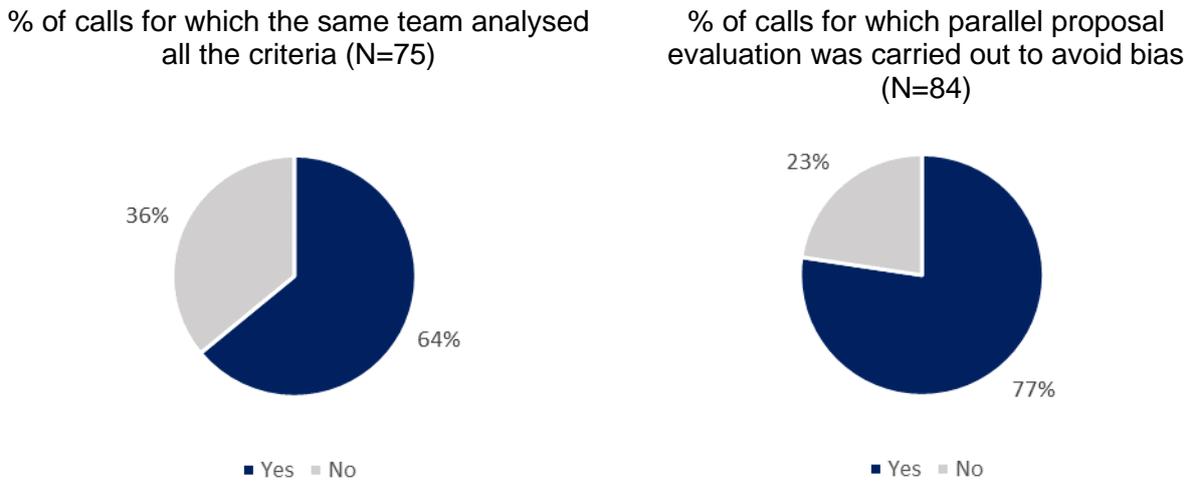
Training to evaluators was provided in 46% of the calls in our sample (83 calls for which this data is available). The majority of the calls that make use of external evaluators provided training for the evaluators.

**Figure 87. Share of calls characterised by written guidance and training schemes**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

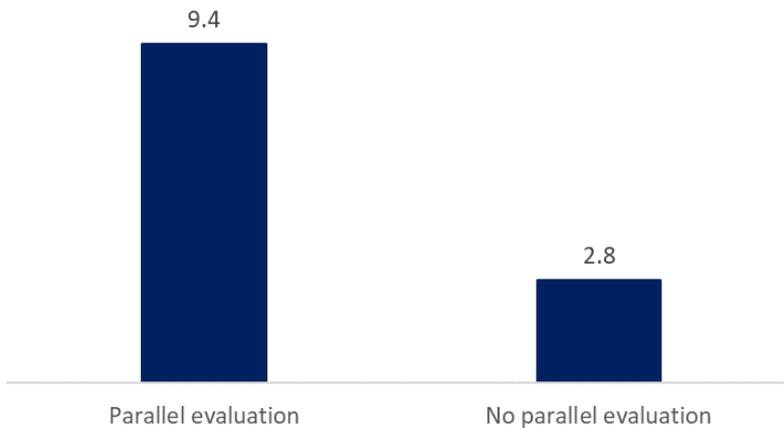
**Figure 88. Share of calls with a single team or parallel proposal evaluation**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The presence of parallel evaluation might reduce biases and mistakes, however, as shown in Figure 89, it implies longer proposal evaluation times. Indeed, the number of days needed to assess eligibility, quality and priority criteria per application is more than three times higher for calls for which parallel evaluation has been carried out than for calls for which no parallel proposal evaluation has been carried out.

**Figure 89. Average number of the days needed to check eligibility, quality and priority criteria by the presence of parallel proposal evaluation to avoid biases (N=70)**



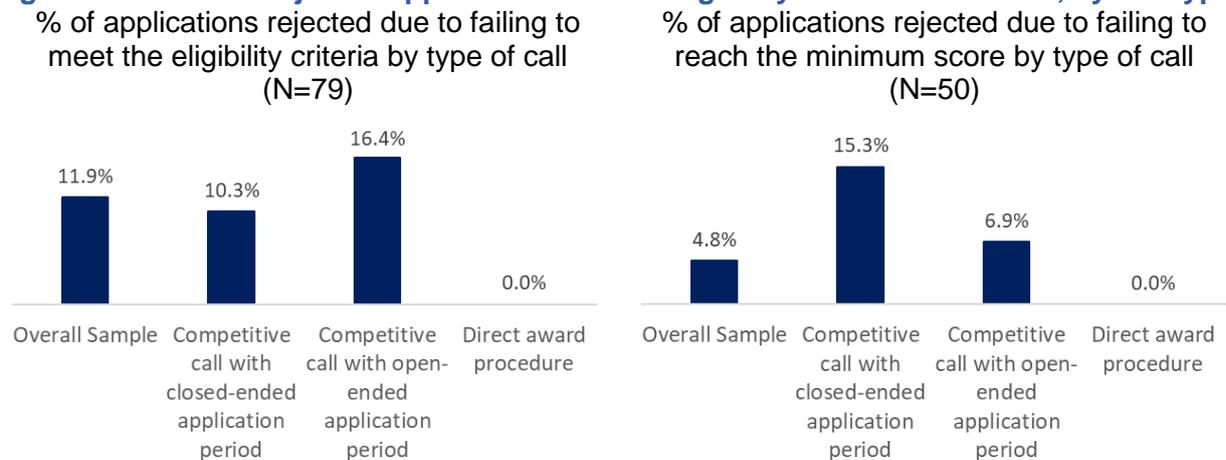
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**Rejected proposals and quality of applications**

Causes of rejection may be various. Rejection can be simply driven by insufficient quality of the proposal, but it can also be that the call was not clear and well designed, or that the criteria have been difficult to apply or too restrictive etc. In our sample, we are able to distinguish between rejections due to failing to meet eligibility criteria and rejections caused by the failing to meet minimum score required.

As expected, direct award procedures do not show any rejected projects linked to eligibility of applications or the minimum score, as in these cases applicants are invited to submit an application and usually, if some elements of the applications are not in line with the eligibility or quality criteria, revision requests are made. For some direct award procedures in our sample, the number of the projects selected/signed and the applications received differs, as in the Lithuanian OP case. This is not due to eligibility or minimum score but rather to voluntary withdrawn of applicants. On average, rejection of the applications seems to be linked to failing to meet the eligibility criteria compared to the rejections linked to failing to reach the minimum score.

**Figure 90. Share of rejected applications due to eligibility or minimum score, by call type**



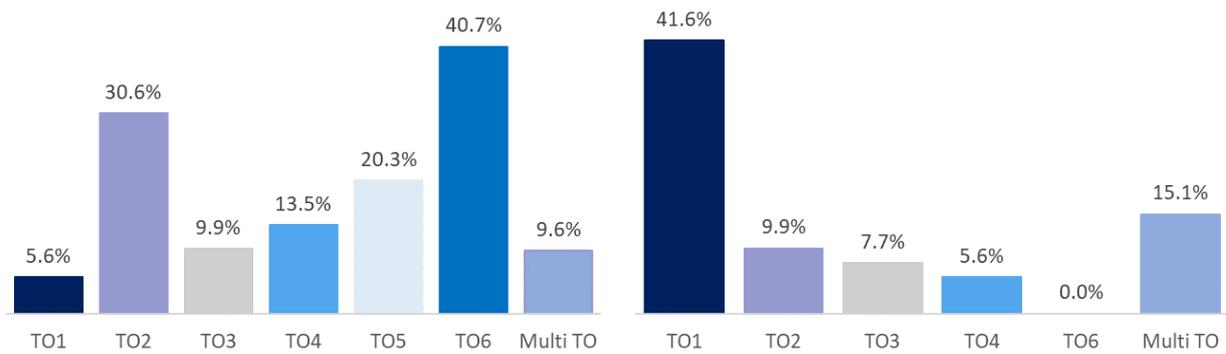
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Across TOs, the situation varies. For calls under TO6, all rejections are due to ineligibility. For calls under TO1 and TO3, a slightly more relevant cause for rejection is failing to meet the minimum required score. The opposite holds for the other TOs (except for calls under TO5 for which we do not have any information on the applications rejected due to the minimum score).

**Figure 91. Share of rejected applications by TO**

% of applications rejected due to failing to meet the eligibility criteria by type of call (N=78)

% of applications rejected due to failing to reach the minimum score by type of call (N=49)



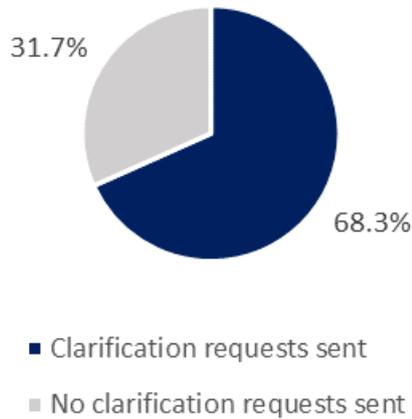
Note: TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Nonetheless, the percentage of rejected applications seems to be linked more to the calls' specific characteristics rather than to belonging to a certain TO or call type. Indeed, when looking at some of the calls that showed a high number of rejected applications, due to failing to meet eligibility criteria, the underlying causes were low clarity of criteria, or missing of necessary elements in the application.

**Requests for clarifications**

Clarification requests were sent for 68% of the calls in our sample for which we have information on clarification requests. For this variable, we did not analyse the number of clarification requests by type of call or TO since the number of clarification requests sent is mainly related to the clarity of the call and applications rather than to TOs or type of call.



**Figure 92. Percentage of calls by the presence of clarification requests (N=82)**

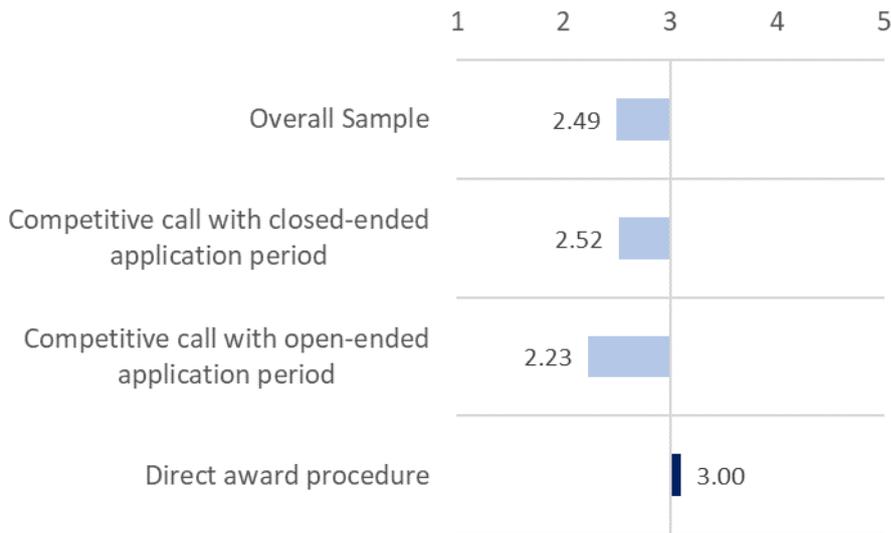
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The number of clarification requests varies greatly across our sample and it is highly related to the number of applications received. Therefore, an indicator of the number of clarification requests as a share of the total number of the application received (see table A. 5 in **Error! Reference source not found.**) has been calculated. For some calls, more than one clarification request per application was sent and this was the case mainly when: call for proposals' documents or criteria were not clear; applicants did not have a good level of relevant skills to understand the call and submit good quality applications; selection criteria were complex.

On the other hand, some calls did not send clarification requests. For example, this happened for the Alpine Space OP. In this case, the calls show a quite standardised process, clear call for proposals' documents and selection criteria. Furthermore, it is likely that the organisation of info days, aimed at presenting the call to potential applicants, helped clarifying the call to the applicants. Some other calls which did not receive clarification requests are characterised by clear guidelines on the selection criteria or benefited from MA/IB support to applicants in the application phase.

The consulted officials were also asked to indicate to what extent the clarification process impacted on the overall proposal evaluation timeframe on a scale from 1 (clarification requests did not generate any delay on the proposal evaluation timeframe) to 5 (clarification requests significantly delayed the proposal evaluation timeframe). The following graphs shows that the impact on timing is on average higher for closed-ended competitive calls. This can be due to the fact that in closed-ended competitive calls quality criteria play a critical role and a large number of calls are evaluated in a relatively limited amount of time. Direct Award procedures show the highest overall impact of clarification requests on the selection process. This is due to the fact that we have only four observations and each of them marked a different grade but also can be explained by the fact that through the proposal evaluation under direct awards procedure dialogues between the authority and the applicants are usually carried out to fine tune the projects.

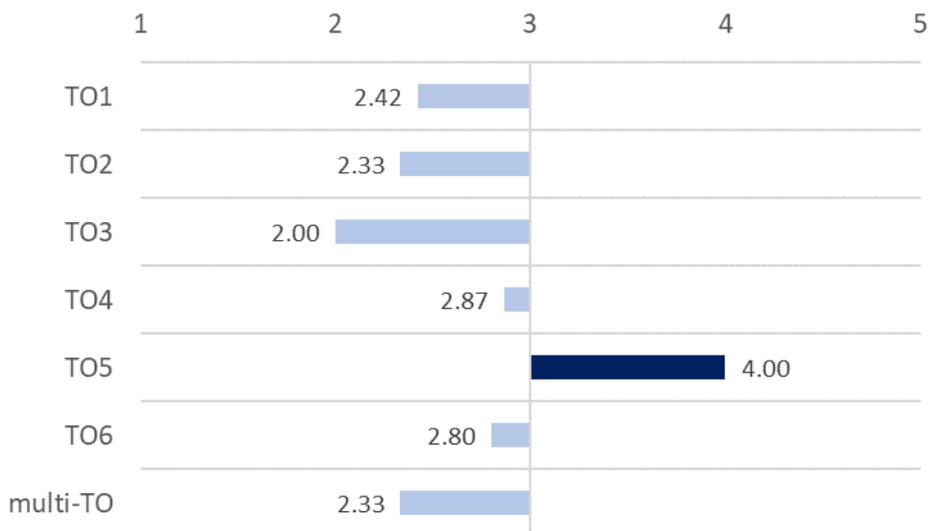
**Figure 93. Average level of impact of clarification requests for the overall sample and by type of calls (N=83)**



Note: The number on the y axis represents the level of impact of the clarification requests as follows: 1 – not at all; 2 – to a small extent; 3 – to some extent; 4 – to a large extent; 5- to a very large extent  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The situation across TOs is mixed. The highest impact seems to be for calls under TO5 for which all the 3 calls with available information stated that the clarification requests impacted the proposal evaluation timeframe to a large extent. Calls under TO6, TO4 and TO1 shows on average a higher impact of the clarification requests on the proposal evaluation timeframe compared to the other calls. This might relate to the complexity of the calls.

**Figure 94. Distribution of calls (in % terms) by the level of impact of clarification requests by TO (N=82)**



Note: The number on the y axis represents the level of impact of the clarification requests as follows: 1 – not at all; 2 – to a small extent; 3 – to some extent; 4 – to a large extent; 5- to a very large extent TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation.  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### **Taking selection decisions**

As regards the way a selection decision is taken by the evaluation panel, in all cases, applications that have successfully passed all phases of proposal evaluation are ranked according to the scores received during the technical and financial evaluation and according to the ranking provisions. Selected applications are those which receive an above threshold score (i.e. depending on the budget for each specific call). However, in few calls (e.g. CY, HR OPs) there is a system applied of “first come, first serve” where the eligible projects passing the minimum quality threshold are automatically selected for financing, up to the point of exhausting the available call funds. We have found that this approach has been used for the horizontal type of support to businesses, such as digitalization or similar. A minimum threshold is usually set at 60% of total maximum score. Usually, there is a threshold for each evaluation criterion – this means that the applications need to meet the minimum for each criterion.

In the majority of the cases, the IB in charge for the call nominates the Evaluation Committee members and a decision is taken on consensus basis. Minimum two evaluators are assessing the same application to avoid any bias and they should reach a consensus on the score given.

Major differences are related to the way decisions are taken. In some calls as in the case of AT call, it is just two-person proposal evaluation and those two assign the final score based on the consensus, while the majority of other cases evaluators assign their score and then present the results to the Evaluation Committee where an agreement must be reached on the final results of the evaluation and on the assigned score.

Another major difference is related to the final approval - while majority of the cases the final decision is taken by the Evaluation Committee, in other cases such as AT and MT OPs, the decision is taken by the IB and in some other cases by the Government (e.g. LT, IE, ES OPs). Based on the information received, it seems that the dominating practice is that MA or IB are the ones to check the final evaluation scores and are ultimately responsible for the outcome of the CFP, regardless of the involvement of the external evaluators. In Interreg programmes, the Joint Monitoring Committee takes the final funding decisions.

### **IT solutions**

As regards the IT solutions used to support the proposal evaluation (or proposal appraisal) process, there is still not a wide-spread use of specific tools (less than half of the analysed calls used dedicated IT tools in the selection process). Sometimes, there are IT platforms which facilitate the submission process and allow for fully digitalized submission and selection procedure (e.g. HR, BG, CY, CZ, EL, FI, LV, LT, RO OPs). Nevertheless, there are still many examples of a simple exchange of documents by email (e.g. Word, PDF documents and Excel sheets) and manual filling-in the checklists and evaluation grids which could lead to human errors and the need for multiple checks (leading to additional administrative burden).

In some cases, the authorities are still working with printed documents and using live meetings. Furthermore, in many cases digital signatures are still not accepted.

### **Problems occurred**

There are very few problems reported which have occurred during the proposal appraisal and selection of projects.

The most common problem identified was related to the insufficient human resources, especially if multiple calls were open in parallel by the same MA/IB. Another common problem is the engagement of external expert which are fully available throughout the selection period and do not have any conflict of interest.

Other problems encountered are specific to individual calls. For example, it may be difficult to determine the eligibility of a cost or hard to determine the state-aid intensity. In some calls there was a recognition that there were too many criteria set (sometimes also several calls running in parallel under the responsibility of the same team) and as a consequence the proposal evaluation took much longer than expected.

There were few cases which reported problems with the stability of the IT platform and occurring technical issues. In several cases, there were delays linked to obtaining clarifications from the applicants and additional (or missing) supporting documents. In the other case, there was a relatively large amount of ongoing assessment needed as each 'mini call' was done on a monthly basis. There was also a relatively large amount of application paperwork to look through for each call.

There is a trade-off between the amount of paperwork which is necessary to obtain from applicants and the time needed to assess such documentation. Achieving a balance remains challenging.

### 3.2.7. Information about award decision and complaint management (step 8)

#### Key findings

- To **inform applicants** about the outcome of the selection, **several channels are used** (e.g. written notifications by post, e-mail, phone calls, a dedicated IT platform). Almost in all cases, unsuccessful applicants receive some communication with the **reasons for rejection** and a reminder of their legal options in case they want to submit a complaint. The most frequent reason for rejection is the inadequate quality of the proposal.
- The **“complaint rate”**, or average number of complaints received as percentage of submitted applications, is **approximately 8% for competitive procedures**. In comparison, the average number of legal appeals as a percentage of submitted applications is nearly 1% (approx. 5% for open-ended calls).
- There is a correlation between the quality of the **public consultations** carried out when drafting a call and the number of complaints received. Public consultations seem to **reduce uncertainty, producing fewer requests for clarification and complaints**.
- To **avoid complaints and legal appeals hampering or even blocking the contracting phase**, it is important to identify solutions such as, for example, keeping a financial buffer or reserve list and making it possible to continue the contracting procedures regardless of the complaints submitted.

This step of the selection process covers the activities related to award decision and complaint management. The data on this step gathered in the checklists are listed in the following table.

**Table 11. List of data collected for step 8**

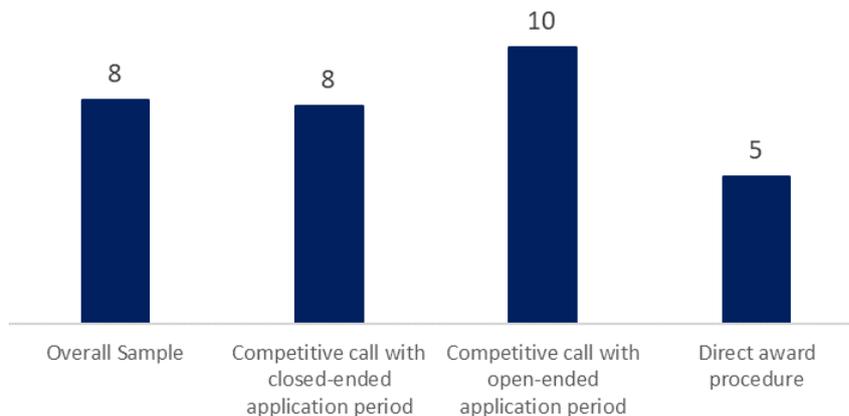
	Variable	Unit of measurement
8.1	Total persons involved	Number of people
8.2	of whom: internal officials	Number of people
8.3	of whom: external personnel (TA or experts)	Number of people
8.4	Number of full-time working days required to the involved personnel	Number of full-time working days
8.5	How applicants have been informed on the results of selection/award procedure?	Qualitative description
8.6	Is feedback and/or justifications on the decision provided to the not-selected applicants?	Yes/No
8.7	Number of complaints received	Number of complaints
8.8	Number of legal appeal against the selection/award decision	Number of legal appeals
8.9	Number of rejected projects restored after the complaints or the legal appeal	Number of restored projects
8.10	What are the main reasons of complaints and legal appeals?	Qualitative description

### Persons involved in the award decision and complaint management

The following figure shows the average number of total personnel involved (internal and external) in this step of the selection process by type of call. It is worth noting that estimating the number of personnel involved in this specific phase was complex for the MAs who relied on different information and did not apply a common method. Due to this high degree of discretion, making comparisons and drawing conclusions is challenging, if at all possible.

The information on persons involved is provided for 82 out of the 87 calls in our sample. On average, for the entire sample, approx. 8 persons per call are involved in the phase of information about award decision and complaint management, much less compared to the previous step 7 (appraisal of proposals and selection of projects) where around 30 people were needed to carry out the activities. The number of involved persons is higher in competitive calls (8 for closed-ended and 10 for open-ended calls) than for direct award procedures (5). This is expected as, usually, direct award procedures are targeted to a lower number of applications and typically, no complaints or legal appeals arise (as shown later on in the text) while dialogues/negotiations take place among the involved parties in order to finalise the projects.

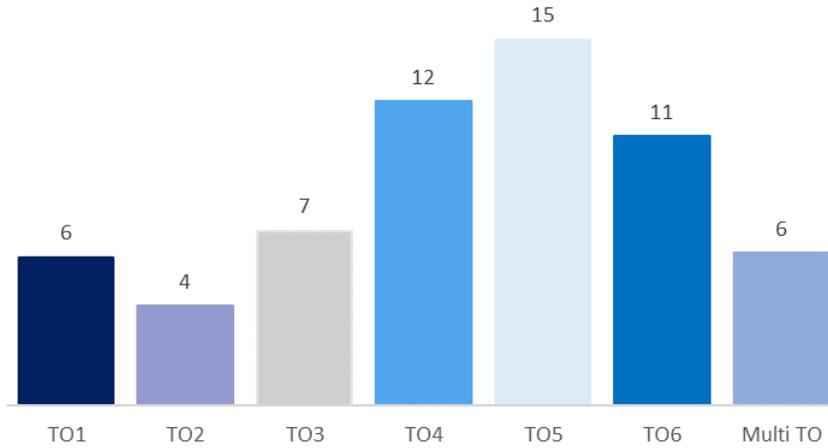
**Figure 95. Average number of personnel involved by type of call (N=82)**



Note: The number of personnel includes: internal personnel and external personnel involved in step 8.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Among TOs, on average TO5, TO4, TO6 show the highest number of personnel needed to carry out step 8. However, the number of observations is limited to draw conclusions which can be generalised.

**Figure 96. Average number of personnel involved by TO (N=81)**



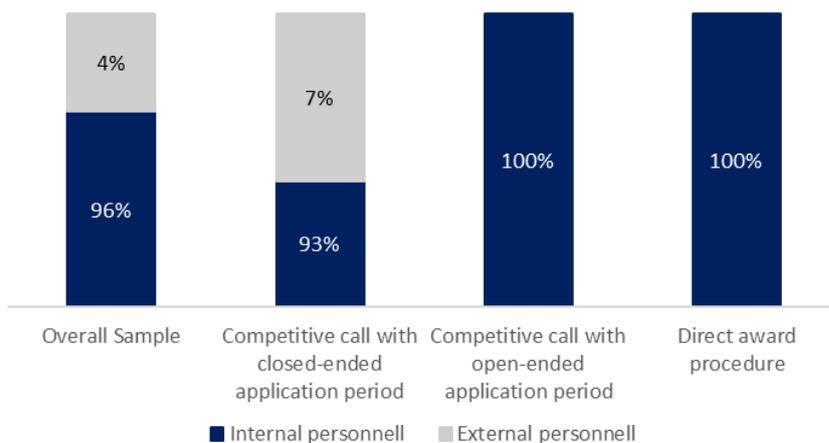
Note: The number of personnel includes: internal personnel and external personnel involved in step 8. TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Restricting the sample and looking only at the data with the highest number of human resources involved in step 8, there is not clear evidence that calls with a very high number of personnel involved show a considerably higher number of applications or complaints/legal appeals, or any particular issue related to step 8.

For one of the analysed calls for the Finnish OP, there was no personnel involved in this step, due to the automation of the process of informing applicants about the outcome of the selection which happens via the Finnish e-cohesion system. Furthermore, for this call, no complaints or legal appeals have been received.

86% of the calls in our sample for which we have information on human resources needed to carry out step 8 does not use any external personnel. The number of external experts as share of total personnel involved is shown in the figure below for the overall sample and by type of call. For the overall sample, only 4% of the total persons involved in step 8 are external. External human resources have been only recruited in the case of competitive calls with closed-ended application period, and are mostly represented by technical assistance.

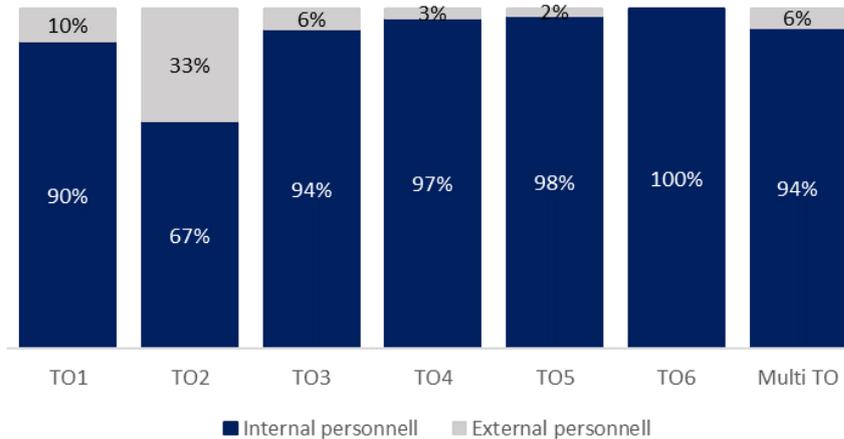
**Figure 97. Average percentage of external and internal personnel by overall sample, type of call (N=71)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The highest share of external personnel is observed in relation to TO2 and, to a lesser extent, TO1 and multi TOs. Considering that, in general, this is not a human resources intensive step, when we find a high share of external personnel this is probably related to the way the activities are organised rather than to differences across TOs or types of calls.

**Figure 98. Average percentage of external and internal personnel by TO (N=70)**

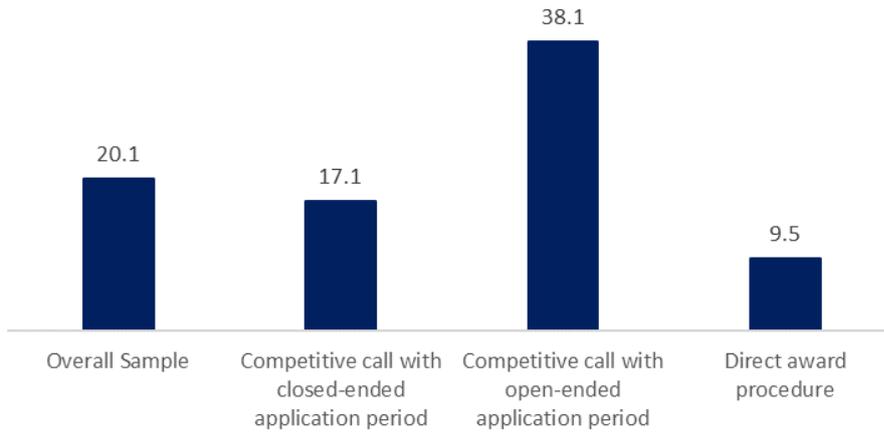


Note: TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Full-time equivalent working days per application

The next figure shows the number of full-time equivalent working days, that were necessary to carry out step 8. On average 22.3 FTE days are needed to carry out step 8. Open-ended competitive calls require on average 38.1 days while closed-ended applications require less FTE days (17.1). This could be explained by the fact that as shown in Figure 102, open-ended competitive calls in our sample show also a higher percentage of legal appeals over the total application received. Direct award procedures exhibit the lowest number of FTE days probably due to the fact that usually a fewer number of applications are concerned under direct awards. These results are confirmed for the competitive calls even when weighting the FTE days by the number of applications received, which indicates that these results do not depend on the number of applications (see figure A. 6 in Annex I), while when dividing by number of applications received the direct awards show the highest number of FTE days per application. This is probably due to the fact that under direct award usually continuous exchanges between the authority and applicants occur usually to modify some aspects of the projects.

**Figure 99. Average number of FTE days needed to carry out step 8 by type of call (N=75)**

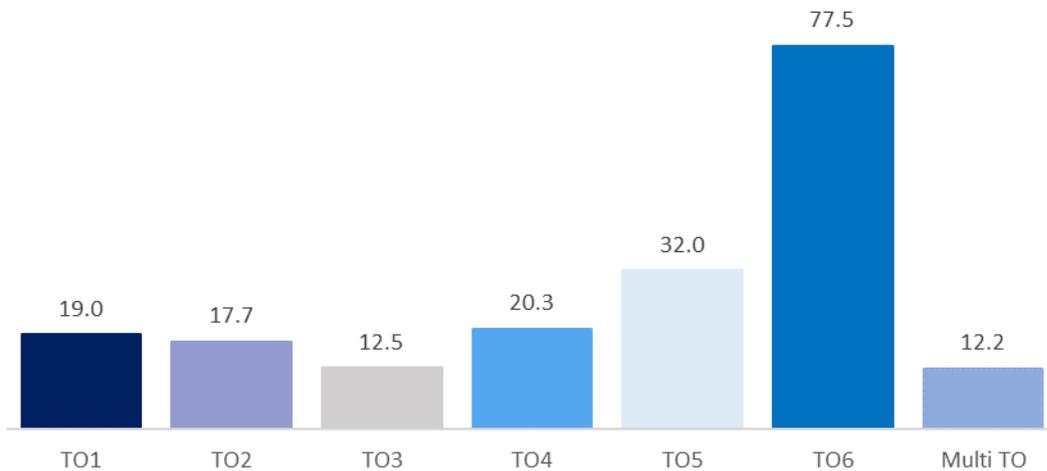


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Across TOs the situation is varied, with calls under TO6, TO5, and TO4 showing the highest number of days needed to carry out step 8. These results are confirmed even when weighting the FTE days by the number of applications received, which again indicates that these results do not depend on the number of applications (see figure A. 7 in Annex I).

Overall, as previously explained, interpreting FTE days data and drawing conclusions from them is challenging as the sources are various estimations of the MAs/IBs while there is no formal record on this.

**Figure 100. Average number of FTE days needed to carry out step 7 by type of call (N=74)**



Note: TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Complaints and legal appeals

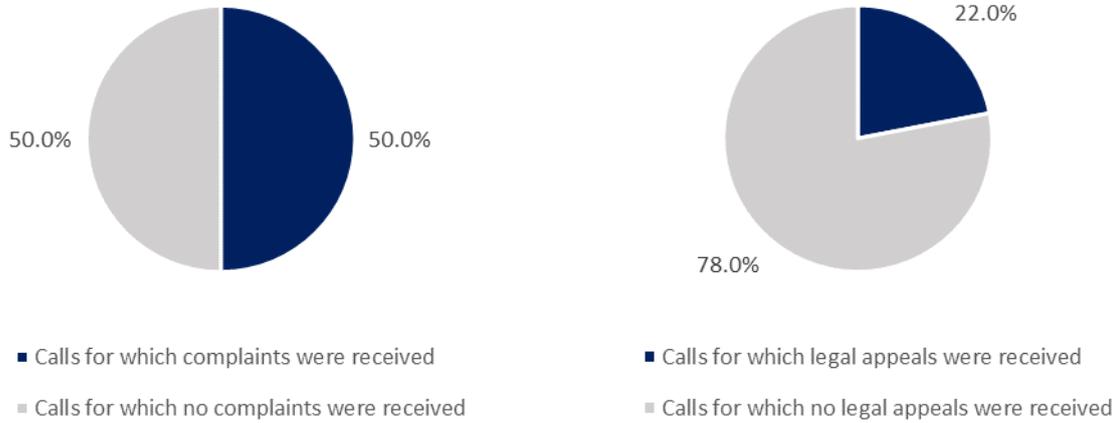
In our sample, for 76 calls there is information on complaints and for 82 calls there is information on legal appeals. Complaints on the proposal evaluations were received for 50% of the calls in our subsample, while 22,2% of the calls generated legal appeals.



**Figure 101. Distribution of number of calls by the presence of complaints or legal appeals**

Percentage of the number of calls for which complaints were received and for which no complaints were received (N = 76)

Percentage of the number of calls for which legal appeals were received and for which no legal appeals were received (N = 82)



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

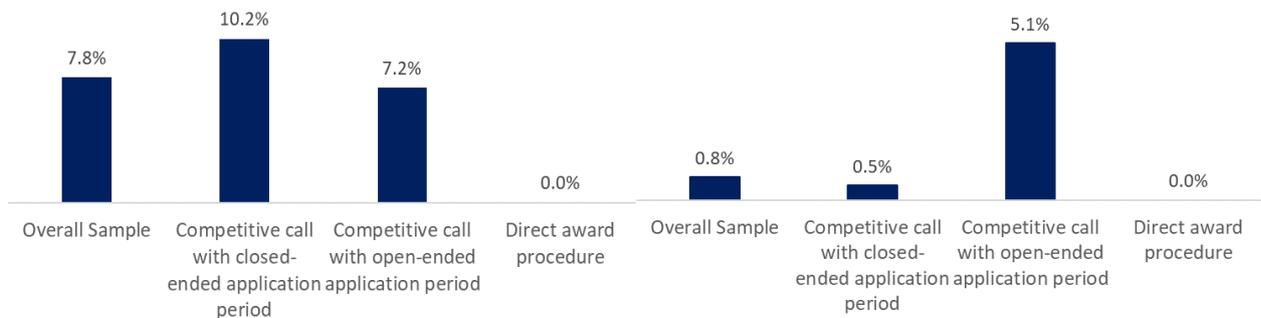
Direct award procedures did not receive any complaint or legal appeal. This is probably due, as explained above, to the nature of this selection procedure in which usually there are dialogues among the authority and the applicants during the proposal evaluation to fine tune the projects and ensure they respect all the foreseen conditions on eligibility and quality.

On the contrary, competitive calls foreseen a proposal evaluation that would lead to the award of the funding if certain conditions are satisfied (open-ended calls) and if the projects reach the highest score among the participants to the calls (closed-ended calls). Closed-ended calls show on average a slightly higher percentage of complaints received (10.2%) with respect to open-ended competitive calls (7.2%), while a much lower percentage of legal appeals received (0.5%) compared to the open-competitive calls (5.1%).

**Figure 102. Average number of complaints or legal appeals received as a percentage of total applications received by call type**

Average number of complaints received as a percentage of applications submitted by call type (N = 73)

Average number of legal appeals received as a percentage of applications submitted by call type (N = 77)



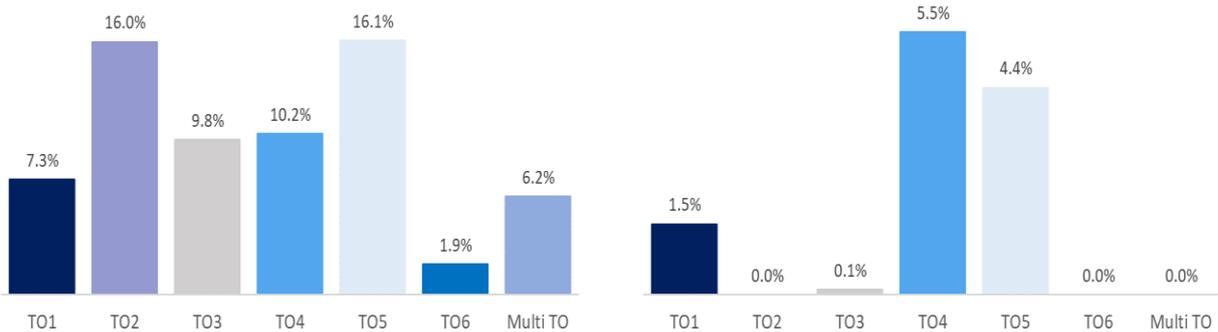
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Calls under TO5, TO4 and TO2 show the highest percentage of complaints received over the total applications received (around 10%). This might be linked also to the higher complexity of calls under TO4 and TO5 that usually include infrastructure or complex projects, and also show the highest presence of legal appeals.

**Figure 103. Average number of complaints or legal appeals as a percentage of total applications received by TO**

Average number of complaints received as a percentage of applications submitted by TO (N = 72)

Average number of legal appeals received as a percentage of applications submitted by call TO (N = 76)



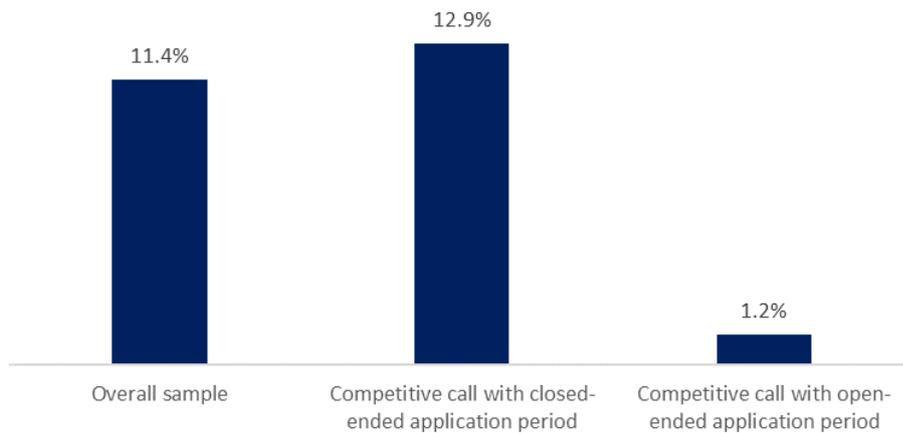
Note: TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Nonetheless, the percentage of complaints and especially legal appeals received are probably more related to the OP, the national legal framework and the specific call for proposals rather than to the type of call or TO. Indeed, when looking at the 8 calls in our sample with the highest number of legal appeals, we find that three calls are from Slovakia, three from Italy and two from Romania. These are all countries where the national experts highlighted that national legislation and administrative culture represent important sources of gold plating and sometimes an obstacle for the selection of operations, adding complexity and delaying the selection process. This could lead to a higher number of legal appeals.

In our sample we were also able to collect information on the number of applications restored after the examination of the complaints and legal appeals. Analysing the number of restored applications without weighting them by the number of complaints and legal appeals received would not be meaningful as the number of restored applications heavily depend on the number of complaints and legal appeal raised. Therefore, an indicator of the percentage of restored applications over the total number of complaints and legal appeals has been calculated and the results are shown in Figure 104.

It is worth noting though, that the indicator can be calculated only for 36 calls which received complaints and legal appeals, and for which information on restored applications is also available. Keeping in mind the limits due to the small number of observations, we can observe that closed-ended competitive calls show a significantly higher percentage of projects restored than open-ended competitive calls (see the following figure). This might be due to the fact that the focus on quality and priority criteria in closed-ended calls may leave more room for interpretations of the evaluators during the proposal evaluation phase, leading to more complaints and appeals.

**Figure 104. Average number of projects restored after complaints/legal appeals as a percentage of the total number of complaints and legal appeals received by call type (N=36)**



Note: Direct award is not included in the analysis since for direct award procedures no complaints and legal appeals were raised.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Several open questions were asked in relation to the step on information about the award decision and complaints management. In particular, in compiling the checklists, qualitative information was collected on how applicants have been informed on the results of the selection/award procedure, whether feedback was given to the not-selected applicants, and on the main reasons of complaints and legal appeal.

### Informing on proposal evaluation results

In most cases, authorities used more than one different form of communication on the proposal evaluation and selection results. Written notifications sent by post or e-mail are still prevailing. Phone calls or notifications only through a dedicated IT platform are also used, though to a lesser extent (AT, CZ, DK, IE, IT, LT, PL, ES OPs). Some, such as the BG and HR OP, employ multiple forms of communication (written notifications, email, a dedicated IT platform).

Most of the countries make the list of the successful applications publicly available on the dedicated website of the programme. Reserve list and a list of unsuccessful applications is also sometimes published, although rarely (e.g. in the BG OP).

### Feedback to non-selected applicants

As regards notifying unsuccessful applicants about the outcome of the selection process, almost in all cases in our sample, these receive some communication with the reasons for rejection and a reminder of the legal options they have in case they want to submit a complaint.

In specific cases (DE OP) there is no formal feedback to the unsuccessful applicants or they are provided feedback only following a formal request (IE OP).

### Reasons for complaints and legal appeals

According to the information which is available on the appeal process, this is not always an option (e.g. it is not possible in SE OP). In the cases in which there is a possibility to appeal, the underlying reasons are related to eligibility of applicants/activities, selection criteria and scoring. In general, the appeals can be in two stages: a first stage appeal is filed to the MA, while a second stage appeal (if the first stage is not satisfactory) is filed to the relevant national court authority.

Some countries do not allow for this second stage appeal. Appeal procedures remain confidential - there is no publicly available information on the number and content of the complaints.

Usual reasons for complaints are related to the scoring system, claiming that the evaluators have not understood well the proposed project. Some applicants even mentioned that they regret not having an opportunity to “defend” the project before an Evaluation Committee. Others mention the “suitability” of the evaluators or mistakes in the data provided as reasons for complaints.

In a number of cases, it was highlighted that there seem to be a correlation between the quality public consultation carried out when drafting CFP and the number of complaints received in the selection process. In other words, good quality public consultations seem to reduce uncertainty, less requests for clarification and complaints.

### 3.2.8. Signature of contracts (step 9)

#### Key findings

- **Signing the contracts is the second most resource-intensive step** in selecting operations. Competitive closed-ended calls require the largest effort to prepare and sign the contracts (128.8 FTE days) compared to open-ended calls (68.8 FTE days) and direct awards (43.2 FTE days).
- This selection process step **lasts, on average, 237.8 calendar days**. The duration ranges between **13 to 1,387 days for competitive calls**. While it ranges between **27 to 111 days for direct award procedures**.
- Looking at FTE days per contract signed, closed-ended competitive calls remain the most human resource intensive (on average 1.5 FTE days per contract), direct awards on average need require 1.1 FTE days per contract, while open-ended calls require 0.4 FTE days.
- **Digitalisation can produce a strong positive impact** in this step. Indeed, IT tools and digital signatures considerably reduce the effort needed for signing contracts. When IT tools are not used, and the contract needs to be signed on paper, the necessary effort in terms of FTE days is nearly five times the effort needed when contracts can be signed online. A similar gain can be expected if it is not necessary to provide original documents when signing the contracts.
- Negotiations and **adjustments of project proposals** are practices used in 26.1% of the calls covered in the analysis. Even though negotiations and adjustments (e.g. concerning budget, scope of activities, timeframe) lead to higher FTE days per contract, it may save time during the implementation.
- Providing regular support to applicants is very important at this stage; offering **training on contract management to selected beneficiaries** to avoid potential irregularities and financial corrections is considered a good practice.

This step of the call selection process is about signature of contracts. The data on this step gathered in are listed in the following table.

**Table 12. List of data collected for step 9**

	Variable	Unit of measurement
9.1	Total persons involved	Number of people
9.2	of whom: internal officials	Number of people
9.3	of whom: external personnel (TA or experts)	Number of people
9.4	Number of full-time working days required	Number of full-time equivalent days
9.5	What specific IT tools are used to prepare and sign the contract? Please indicate, if contracts can be signed digitally.	Qualitative description
9.6	Are original paper documents required for the signature of the contract? If so what types of documents are required?	Qualitative description
9.7	Was the practice to negotiate specific elements of the project proposal/application as recommended by the selection panel used for this call?	Yes/No
9.8	To what extent did beneficiaries encounter problems in preparation and signature of the contracts?	1-5 Likert scale
9.9	To what extent did the contracting body (MA/IB) encounter problems during the preparation and the signature of the contracts?	1-5 Likert scale
9.10	Delay in the signature of the contracts (number of days) due to complaints or legal appeal	Number of days
9.11	If any, did the legal appeal block the signature of the contract process?	Yes/No
9.12	Number of irregularities reported by auditors or IB) on the operations (projects) implemented for this call for proposal	Number of irregularities

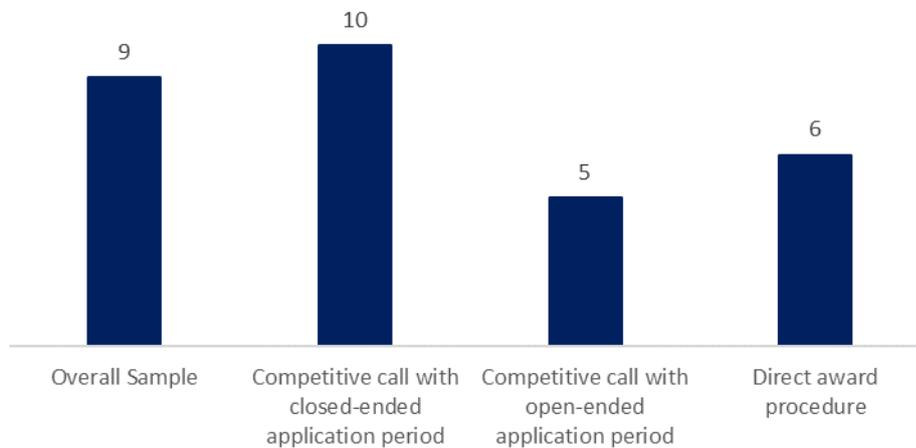
<b>9.13</b>	Number of irregularities reported by auditors on this selection process
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Number of irregularities
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### Persons involved in the signature of contracts

The following table shows the number of persons involved in the phase of contract preparation and signature. For the entire sample, on average 9 persons participate in this step. The number of persons involved is higher for closed-ended competitive calls (10) than for open-ended competitive calls (5) and Direct award procedures (6). Competitive open-ended calls show the lowest number of people needed for step 9. This might be explained by the fact that contracts are signed on a rolling basis and therefore less concentrated effort is required, and that for the open-ended calls in our sample no negotiations/adjustments of the project proposal took place during the contracting phase.

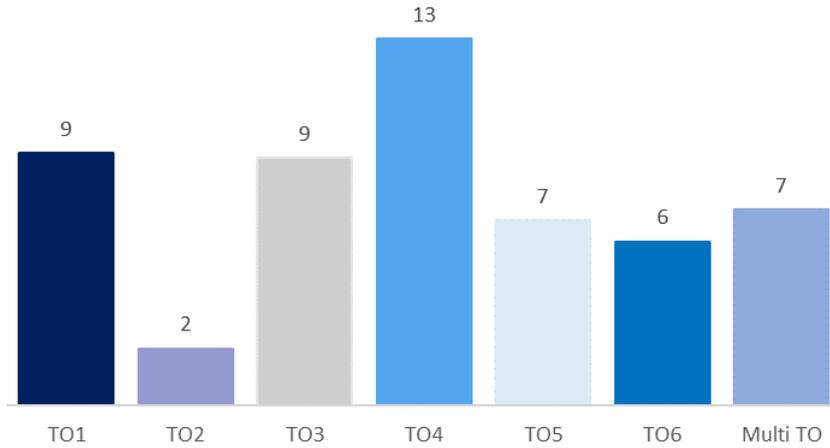
**Figure 105. Average number of personnel involved by type of call (N=74)**



Note: The number of personnel includes: internal personnel and external personnel involved in step 9.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

On average, calls under TO4, TO1 and TO3 are those that require most human resources to prepare and sign the contracts. This can be related to a mix of complexity (e.g. multiannual infrastructure investments in TO4) and/or large number of applications (e.g. SME support in TO3 and aid schemes for collaborative research and innovation in TO1).

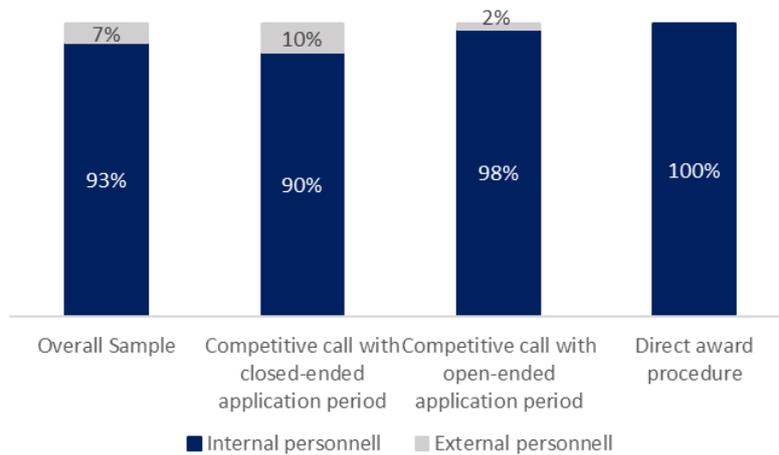
**Figure 106. Average number of personnel involved by TO (N=73)**



Note: The number of personnel includes: internal personnel and external personnel involved in step 9. TO8 has been excluded from the graph since it included only one observation.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

The figure below provides information on the number of external experts as share of total personnel. Only in a limited number of calls, external experts participate in this step of the selection process (just 7 calls out of the 58 calls that provide information on this aspect). The average number of external experts, as a share of the total personnel involved in step 9, is 7% for the overall sample. Direct award procedures do not include any external personnel in step 9, while the highest share of external experts (10%) are involved in closed-ended competitive calls, probably due to the highly concentrated effort. In our sample, external experts are involved in only one Austrian open ended competitive call, under TO1.

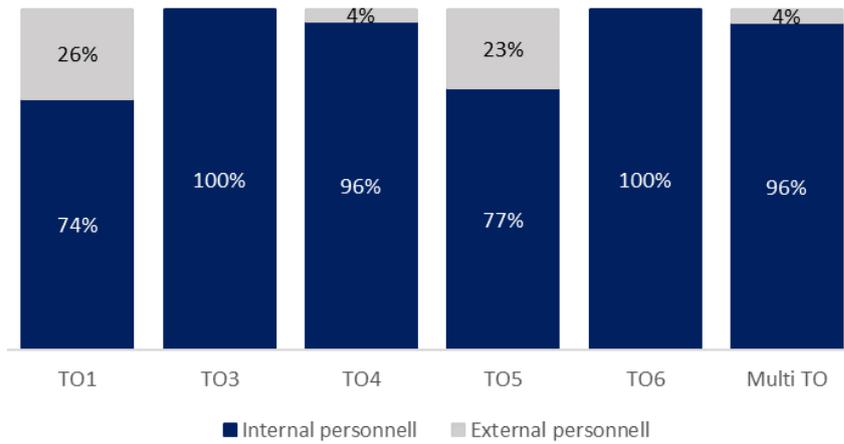
**Figure 107. Share of external and internal personnel involved in step 9 by type of call (N=68)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

If we look at differences across TOs, we can observe that external personnel are not involved in calls under TO3 and TO6. The most significant involvement of external human resources happens under TO1. The results on TO5 are only based on two observations and largely driven by the Italian case (OP Sicily) where around half of the personnel involved in step 9 was from the company providing technical assistance services.

**Figure 108. Share of external and internal personnel involved in step 9 by TO (N=66)**

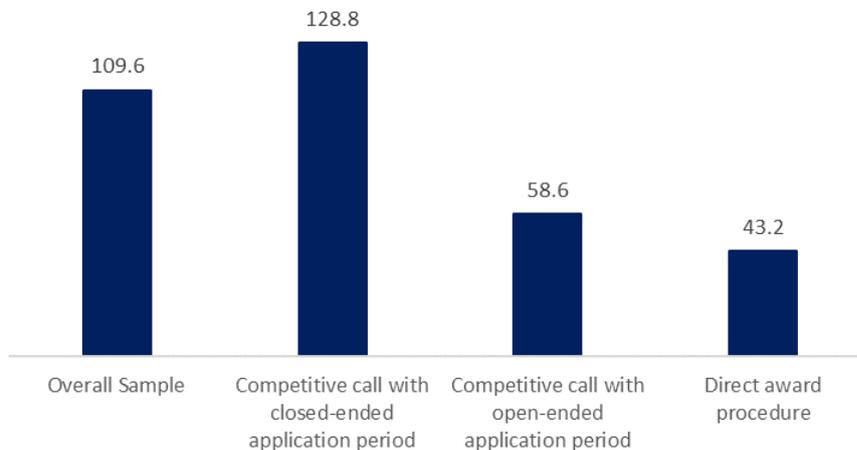


Note: The number of personnel includes: internal personnel and external personnel involved in step 9. TO8 and TO2 have been excluded from the graph since they included only one observation.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Full-time equivalent working days

The number of full-time equivalent working days represents the effort needed by the personnel to carry out step 9. Competitive closed-ended calls in our sample require the largest effort to prepare and sign the contracts (128.8 FTE days) compared to open-ended calls (68.8 FTE days) and direct award (43.2 FTE days). If we calculate the number of FTE days per contract signed (see figure A. 8 in Annex I), we can see that while closed-ended competitive calls remain the most human resource intensive calls (on average 1.5 FTE days per contract signed), direct award on average needs more FTE days per contract (1.1) compared to open-ended calls (0.4).

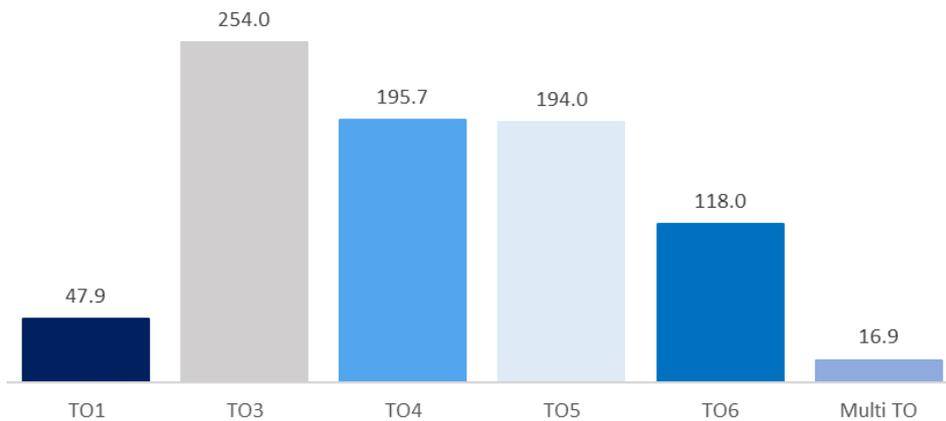
**Figure 109. Average number of FTE days needed to carry out step 9 by type of call (N=66)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

Some statistics by TO are shown in the following figure. TO3, TO4 and TO5 are those for which more effort is required to carry out step 9. This seems to be mostly influenced by number of contracts signed. Indeed, when the number of FTE days is divided by the number of contracts signed, TO3 is not anymore among those which record the largest number of FTE days (see figure A. 9 in Annex I).



**Figure 110. Average number of FTE days needed to carry out step 9 by type of call (N=64)**

Note: TO8 and TO2 have been excluded from the graph since they included only one observation.  
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

It is also worth noting that the two calls with the highest number of FTE days needed for the preparation and signature do not allow to sign the contracts online. This need for signing the documents in person, probably, means more time necessary for this phase.

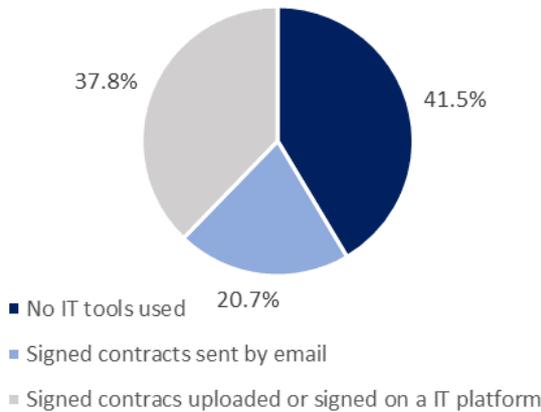
### Level of digitalisation

The information collected on this step of the selection process, through the checklists, provide insights also on specific IT tools used for signing contracts, and on whether documents need to be submitted in original format or there are means that allow electronic exchange of information.

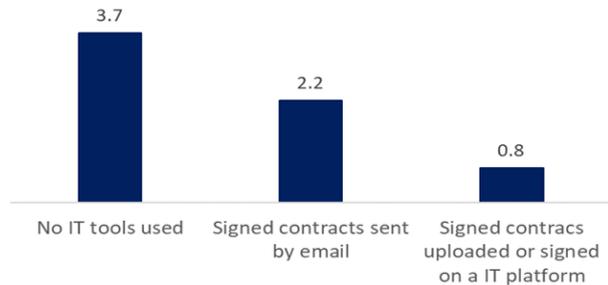
For the majority of the calls on which we have information on this variable (58.5% of the total), signed contracts are exchanged in digital form (either by email or using an IT platform). This has impacts on the effort needed to carry out step 9. Indeed, when there are no IT tools and the contract need to be signed on paper, 3.7 FTE days per contract are needed. This number decreases to 2.2 when it is possible to send contracts by email, and it goes down further to 0.8 when contracts can be uploaded or signed directly on an IT platform. This shows that the IT platform and digital signature considerably reduces the effort needed to carry out contract signature step.

**Figure 111. Distribution of calls based on the level of digitalisation of contract signature and average FTE days for signing a contract**

Share of calls according to the level of digitalisation of contracting (N=82)



Average FTE days needed to prepare and sign one contract, according to the level of digitalisation (N=65)

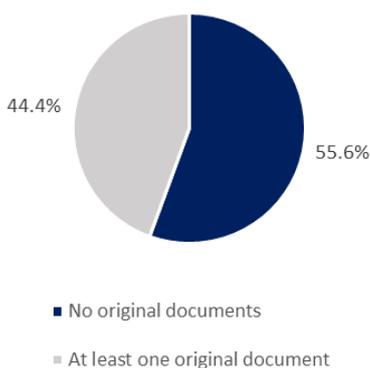


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

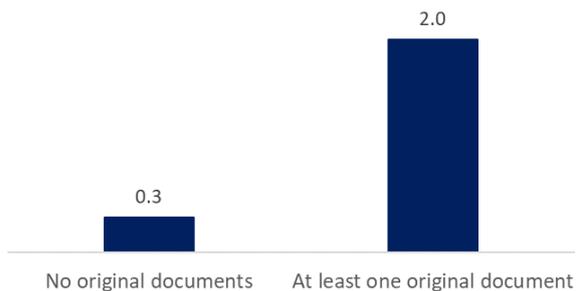
For slightly more than a half of the calls for which we have information on this variable, original documents were not needed for signing the contracts. Furthermore, when original documents are not necessary, the number of FTE days needed to prepare and sign one contract goes down to 0.3, compared to 2.0 FTE days for cases in which at least one document must be provided in original.

**Figure 112. Distribution of calls based on the need to present original documents that and average FTE days for signing a contract**

Share of call that require or do not require original documents (N=81)



Average full-time equivalent days needed to prepare and sign one contract, when original documents are required and when they are not (N=63)



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

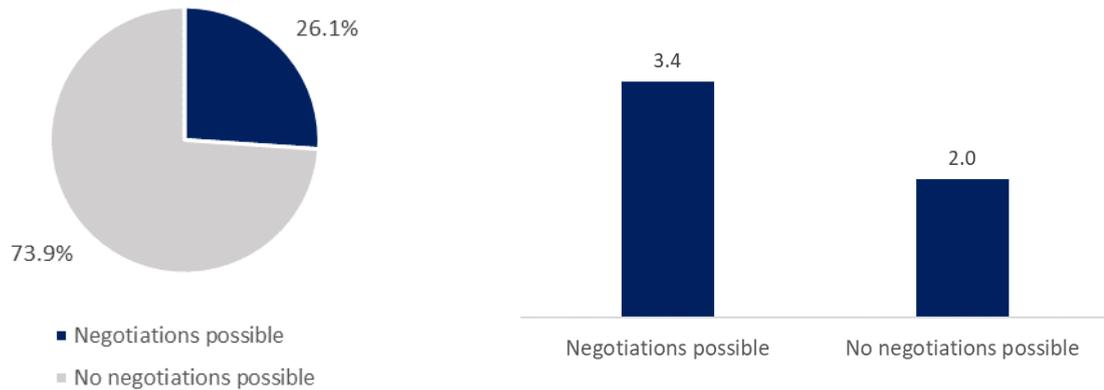
### Renegotiation of the contract

Thanks to the data collected, it is possible to understand whether there were negotiations on specific aspects of the project proposal and adjustments were carried out (e.g. concerning the budget, the scope of activities, the timeframe, etc.), following the recommendations/decisions of the evaluators.

Negotiations and adjustments on project proposals were carried out for 26.1% of the calls for which there is information available on this aspect, as shown in the pie chart below. The possibility to negotiate aspects of the projects is related to higher FTE days per contract, compared to when negotiation is not possible or necessary.

**Figure 113. Distribution of calls according to the possibility of negotiating proposals, and average FTE days per contract**

Share of calls for which negotiation of project proposals is possible or not possible (N=69)      Average full-time equivalent days needed to prepare and sign one contract when negotiation is possible and when it is not (N=55)



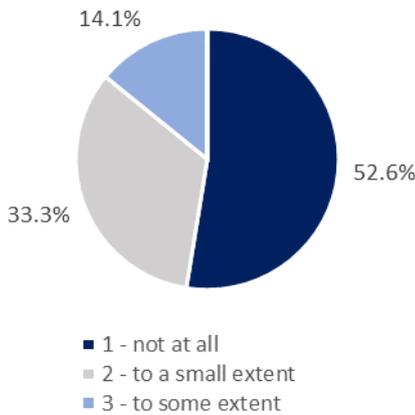
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

### Problems encountered in the signature of contracts

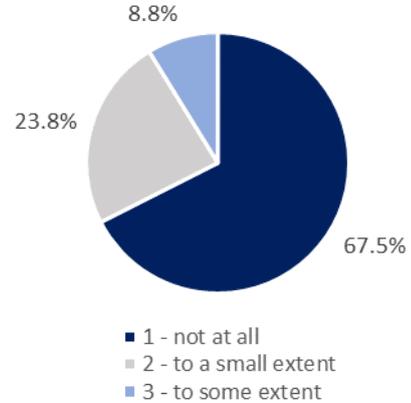
In relation to the extent to which problems were encountered in signing the contracts, the checklists capture the perspective of beneficiaries as well as of MA and IBs. The following pie charts show that some problems, even though quite limited, were encountered by beneficiaries for 47.4% of the calls for which we have this information. On the contrary, problems were encountered by authorities in 34% of the calls. In the large majority of the cases, the problems encountered were considered minor. For example, in the Italian call case, both the MA and the beneficiaries had some difficulties in signing the contract due to the need to adapt to the digital signature. This concerned, especially, beneficiaries, led to several exchanges between the MA and the beneficiaries, and expanded the time needed to carry out the step.

**Figure 114. Extent to which beneficiaries and MA/IBs encountered problems in signing the contracts**

Percentage of calls by the extent to which beneficiaries encountered problems in signing the contracts (N=78)



Percentage of calls by the extent to which MAs/IBs encountered problems in signing the contracts (N=80)

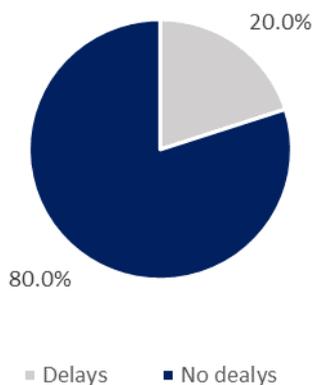


Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

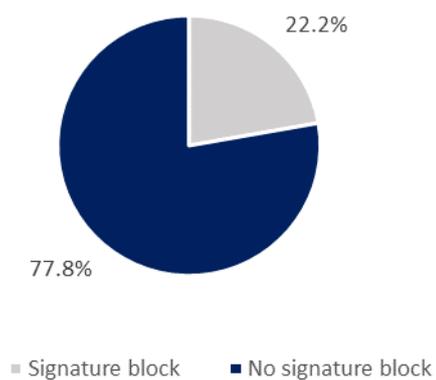
In a very few cases, complaints and legal appeals delayed the signature of the contract, and in 4 calls legal appeals blocked the contract signature.

**Figure 115. Number of calls for which complaints and legal appeals delayed or blocked the contracts signature**

Percentage of calls for which the legal appeals and complaints delayed the signature of the contracts (N=30)



Percentage of calls for which the legal appeals blocked the signature of the contracts (N=18)



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

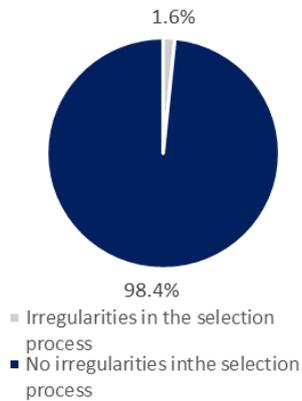
Furthermore, as shown in the figure below, the checklist allows identifying whether irregularities, concerning both the selection process and/or the project implementation have been identified. Irregularities occurred during the selection process were reported for only one of the calls in our

sample. In this case, the irregularity was related to the eligibility assessment and was found when the project was already being implemented.

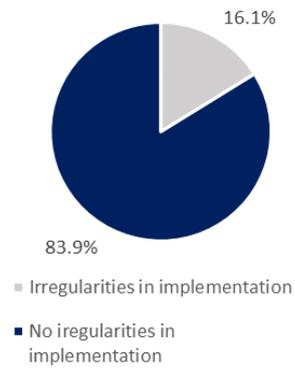
Irregularities in the implementation were reported for 16.1% of calls. Reported anomalies were related to incorrect recording of monitoring indicators; double funding; compliance with public procurement rules and procedures.

**Figure 116. Number of calls for which irregularities in the selection process or project implementation have been reported**

Percentage of calls for which irregularities in the selection process have been reported (N=62)



Percentage of calls for which irregularities in the implementation have been reported (N=62)



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

## 4. Good practices in solving the identified challenges

During the analysis of the sampled 29 OPs we have identified key problems faced by the MAs/IBs in the selection of operations. The solutions implemented to overcome these problems have been also identified. Furthermore, we have highlighted a number of good practices which could be applicable beyond an individual OP and could serve as inspiration to other MAs facing similar issues.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the identified problems, solutions and good practices collected from both the desk research and the stakeholder consultations conducted during our research (consultations with the Managing Authorities, Intermediate Bodies and beneficiaries). This means that the issues identified in the analyses presented in the previous chapters (mainly Chapter 3) of this report are also taken into consideration.

We have grouped the identified problems, solutions and identified good practices according to the pre-defined nine steps of the selection process (see Table 1).

### 4.1. Overview of problems and good practices

In the following table, problems, solutions and good practices are aggregated by step of the selection process. This aggregation is possible as problems and solutions tend to be largely repetitive.

From the table it is obvious that some of the good practices can provide solutions to multiple problems identified.

**Table 13. Overview of main problems, solutions and good practices per selection step**

Driver	Problem	Solutions and good practices applied	Examples of OPs
<b>Step 1: Approval of (general) selection criteria</b>			
Long approval process of the general selection criteria	Long approval process delays the start of the OP implementation	Allowing for informal (“shadow”) Monitoring Committee to approve the selection criteria prior to the OP adoption	BG, DK, DE, EE, IE
Lack of clarity on the horizontal principles	Vague selection criteria related to horizontal principles creates confusion for the applicants and evaluators	Engaging with expert community dealing with different aspects of horizontal principles to clearly define and prepare detailed sectoral guidelines (with examples) on what is expected from the beneficiaries	SK, DK
Lack of harmonized legislative framework in countries participating in interregional projects	Excessive number of selection criteria (national requirements added to the common criteria)	Defining a general eligibility criterion that each project must comply with national legislation and focus only on common criteria shared by the countries involved	BG-RO

TOWARDS SIMPLIFICATION - ANALYSIS OF SELECTION OF OPERATIONS

<b>Step 2: Preparation of the intervention (needs analysis)</b>			
Lack of market analysis (or outdated market analysis)	Lack of clearly defined focus of the intervention	Engaging with expert community to ensure good understanding of the needs and segmentation of the target groups	IE, HR
<b>Step 3: Definition of (specific) selection criteria</b>			
Lack of understanding of full range of EU and national legislative requirements, beyond a specific sector/theme	Definition of unclear selection criteria in relation to the interpretation of the legal requirements, such as e.g. state aid rules, required permits, environmental requirements, employment regulation, etc.	Maintaining regular communication between all the public bodies involved (not exclusively through the formal meetings of the Monitoring Committee) to gain full clarity on all the legislative requirements	SK, DK
Lack of clear focus of the call	Definition of too many selection criteria; criteria not fully operational in terms of their application and scoring system	Conducting the focus groups or surveys in the phase of the call design to ensure that the aim of the call is clear and also to collect feedback on the draft selection criteria (their clarity and feasibility) from the perspective of the target group; whenever possible, using online public consultation tools	SL, Alpine Space, BE, FR, LV, NL
Insufficient transparency on the scoring system	Selection criteria and the scoring system are not fully clear and explained	Ensuring that the project scoring system is clear to the applicants (and evaluators) so that they could assess their project with relatively high certainty in relation to the expected score. Ensuring full transparency on the criteria assessment methodology (incl. ranges of scores)	EL, RO, BE
<b>Step 4: Drafting the call for proposal documents</b>			
Lack of clarity of call for proposal documents (including "bureaucratic language")	Lack of sufficient interest by the applicants due to high uncertainty on the requirements; complex and unclear application forms lead to less and lower quality projects	Consulting on the call for proposal documents with the target group prior to the launch of the call and using of standardized templates (application form, grant contract, etc.)	HR, CY, MT, RO-SER, RO, EL, AT, BE, LT
Complex application package (or the perception of its complexity)	Low interest of the target beneficiaries due to lack of confidence or knowledge on how to fill-in the application forms	Offering individual pre-application counselling, engaging also sectoral experts to support the preparation of applications; organising specialised training for the beneficiaries on specific aspects of the applications (e.g. business plan, market analysis, financial projections, etc.)	EE, ES

TOWARDS SIMPLIFICATION - ANALYSIS OF SELECTION OF OPERATIONS

<b>Step 5: Launch of call for proposals</b>			
Inadequate timing of the call and/or too short duration to prepare the proposal	Too short application period or timing which does not fit well with the business cycles of the target group, as well as multiple calls launched at the same time result in less and lower quality applications	Improving the planning for launching the calls and communicating it to the potential beneficiaries. Conducting info-campaigns well in advance and providing as much information as possible on the selection criteria; counselling, sharing the lessons learnt from previous calls and providing guidance to potential applicants	SL, RO-SER, Alpine Space, DK, AT, BG, CZ, IT
<b>Step 6: Submission of applications</b>			
Lack of adequate IT tools, guidance and skills	The application process produces a heavy administrative burden on the applicants and MA/IB staff	Implementing a fully digitalised process with pre-defined templates which also allow for more efficient proposal evaluation and contracting; ensuring training and detailed guidance (and technical support) on the use of IT tool; allowing for digital submission of questions and publishing the answers (e.g. FAQ)	CY, SL, RO, MT, HR
Lack of interoperability between IT tools and public registries	Leads to the need for large number of supporting documents to be provided by applicant	Requesting certain supporting documents only from the selected applications (prior to contract signature); increasing the interoperability with relevant public registries; allowing to retrieve administrative documents from previous submissions by the same applicant	CY, SL, RO
Limited use of e-signature	Adds administrative burden on applicants and, later on, on evaluators	Allowing scanned signatures of applications and supporting documents and providing necessary originals only prior to contract signature	HR
<b>Step 7: Appraisal of the proposals and selection of projects</b>			
Insufficient human resources in the MA/IBs which can work full-time on the appraisal of the proposals	Delays in the proposal appraisal process	Ensuring internal evaluators available to work full-time on the appraisal (this also implies that the timing of the call is known well in advance to make sure that the evaluators are available)	NL, HR, CY, SK, DK, LU, AT, CZ, FI, IT, LT
Complex legislative and contractual environment for hiring the external experts	Difficulties and delays in recruitment of external experts needed in the evaluation process	Opting for longer-term framework contracts for the provision of external assistance to appraise project proposals. These framework contracts can be used by different institutions	AT, IT
Need for right set of knowledge and skills for project appraisal, as well as appropriate working methods	Inconsistencies in the appraisal process	Ensuring necessary expertise (internal and external, if necessary) to conduct the appraisal of proposals. Organizing evaluation committee's meetings (initial and follow-up/consensus) to agree on the methodology and ensure a consistent approach (meetings shall be held regularly during the appraisal process also to discuss	CY, SK, DK, LU, LT, NL-BE



TOWARDS SIMPLIFICATION - ANALYSIS OF SELECTION OF OPERATIONS

		jointly the specific ambiguous cases)	
Lack of adequate IT tools & skills	The appraisal process may pose large administrative burden on the evaluators	Allowing digitalised (and remote, when necessary) evaluation of applications, ensuring that evaluators are trained to use the IT tool, enabling electronic exchange of information between applicants and evaluators (for clarifications or adding missing supporting documents), ensuring technical support at all times	CY, MT, DK, RO, Alpine Space OP, CZ, DE, EE, SE
Lack of transparency on the selection process	Lack of guidelines on assessment of selection criteria and on selection process leads to uncertainties, inconsistencies and mistrust	Providing a clear appraisal guidance to the applicants and to the evaluators	HR, DK
Reluctance of the target groups to apply for more complex calls (such as e.g. R&D or circular economy-related)	Preparation of application requires lots of time and financial investment (e.g. for specialised technical documentation, licences, permits, etc.). This, in combination with the uncertainty on the criteria, puts-off the targeted beneficiaries	In more complex calls with smaller number of applications, allowing dialogue between the applicant and the IB to improve the project proposal. This shall be done in line with the principle of equal treatment	MT, DK, CZ
Lack of feedback loops and efficient learning processes	Lack of improvements over time in the overall management of the proposal appraisal process	After each call has been finalised, carrying out an assessment of the whole proposal appraisal process to identify all the challenges, problems and lessons learnt and to improve the process in the future	CY, DK
<b>Step 8: Informing the applicants on the final outcome of the selection and complaint management</b>			
Lack of transparency on the selection process outcomes	Lack of transparency on the scoring system applied and on reasons for receiving a certain score	Providing transparent feedback on the scores obtained by the applicants; openly informing on the appeal possibilities and processes; ensuring that highly experienced staff (external and internal) do not only conduct the selection process, but also provide detailed feedback to the applicants; in some cases, successful and unsuccessful applicants receive additional phone calls in order to further clarify the scoring and selection process and to ensure that there is a learning process for future applications	HR, CY, SK, DK, LU
<b>Step 9: Contract preparation &amp; signature</b>			
Lack of automated contract preparation process	Delay in contract preparation	Ensuring that the IT tools allow for automated contract preparation, communication with the applicant and digital signature of the contract	CY, MT, HR
No possibility to use digital signature and sign contracts remotely	Less effective contract signature process		
Lack of understanding by the beneficiary of all	Reluctance to sign the contract by the selected applicants;	Offering a training for the beneficiaries on the contract management to avoid mistakes	PL

## TOWARDS SIMPLIFICATION - ANALYSIS OF SELECTION OF OPERATIONS

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the contractual obligations	suspension of the contract due to irregularities in the implementation of the project	and irregularities during contract implementation	
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## 4.2. Summarizing the problems faced

As illustrated by the detailed table above, the problems encountered in the selection process can be grouped on the basis of the following dimensions:

- *Governance and legal framework* (e.g. issues related to the national legal framework; general factors such as administrative culture);
- *Strategic focus and intervention logic* (e.g. relevance to the needs of target group, quality of selection criteria, focus, budget and timing of the call);
- *Human resources* (e.g. issues related to the availability and skills of personnel and experts and their management);
- *Methods and tools* (e.g. issues related to the design of the selection process, use of IT and communication tools);

In the following paragraphs the study findings are summarised in relation to each of the above listed dimensions.

### 4.2.1. Governance and legal framework

This group of issues mainly relates to the legal framework, administrative culture, and historic developments of the Operational Programme.

Some OPs faced difficulties in interpreting transposed EU legal requirements, particularly in areas such as determining the size of the potential beneficiary enterprise, conflict of interest in doing business with related or partner companies, state aid in relation to public companies and public procurement. Another issue often mentioned is the lack of legislation supporting the use of e-signatures. This prevents the use of this tool, resulting in lengthy procedures for signing the contracts.

The lack of a harmonized legislative framework in countries participating in interregional projects is particularly relevant for Interreg programmes, which select operations across several contexts. In such cases, different national legal frameworks can often lead to gold-plating and delays in the selection process. This may result in an excessive number of selection criteria, with national requirements added to the common criteria defined for the call for proposals. This significantly increases the administrative burden for both the MAs/IBs and the applicants.

Administrative culture also has a significant impact on the effectiveness of the selection of operations. In some OPs, the decision-making process involves several validation steps by different bodies and hierarchical levels. In some cases, the validation process entails purely bureaucratic and formal actions, which do not bring any added value to the decision-making process and instead lead to longer decision-making procedures.

Furthermore, inherited administrative cultural issues such as the lack of actual multi-layer coordination can prevent the sharing of lessons learned. This can lead to the implementation of incoherent interventions, an increase in the number of mistakes and ambiguities.

The lack of feedback loops and efficient learning processes, or the perception of a lack of improvements over time in the overall selection of operations, leads to a declining trust in the project appraisal process among the target beneficiaries and, sometimes, the general public.

### 4.2.2. Strategic focus and intervention logic

All elements that feed into the selection process (such as the relevance of the call to the needs of target group, quality of selection criteria, budget and timing of the call, etc.) are covered in this dimension. These factors impact the selection of operations, either speeding up or hindering the process, depending on how efficiently they are designed and implemented.

### 4.2.2.1. *Focus of the call and needs assessment*

The design of a clear call's intervention logic is a critical challenge encountered in many OPs.

It is evident from the results of the analysis that there is a need for thorough consultations with the stakeholders during the call design to ensure that the needs of the territory and target groups are correctly identified and that clear and well-targeted requirements, linked to the objectives of the OP are set out.

Furthermore, in many cases the needs assessment is only undertaken at the beginning of the programming period, while some calls are actually launched several years later. This might hamper the relevance and the focus of the interventions as the needs change over time and, therefore, the needs assessment has to be updated.

The unclear definition of the aim of the call for proposals, of the target group and of the project requirements can result in lower quality of applications and a large number of applications failing to meet the eligibility criteria. This, again, may negatively impact on the effectiveness of the call for proposals.

### 4.2.2.2. *Selection criteria*

The quality of the selection criteria is a critical issue in designing the call. Too many, too complex, too broad, and not-operational criteria, as well as the lack of supporting guidelines on how to assess those criteria, are issues for most calls. This negatively affects both the applicants and the Managing Authorities (MAs)/Intermediate Bodies (IBs), leading to low quality applications and less effective selection processes.

Excessive and complex criteria can significantly delay the evaluation phase, indicating poor market analysis and a lack of clear understanding of the target group's needs. The lack of a clear distinction between eligibility and quality criteria, creates confusion among the applicants and makes it difficult to design a proposal.

Another important aspect is related to the way the MAs/IBs include the horizontal principles among the selection criteria. Horizontal principles are subject to different interpretations and can generate confusion among beneficiaries on how to respond to these requirements. This can give evaluators a high degree of uncertainty on how to assess such principles.

### 4.2.2.3. *Budget of the call for proposals*

In some cases, the envisaged budget of the call and/or co-financing amount (or rate) is considered too low compared to the needs of the target group and the scope of the call. This makes the call less attractive to potential applicants and/or allows financing a very limited number of eligible applications. In both cases, this reflects a poor need analysis and a lack of knowledge on the project pipeline.

### 4.2.2.4. *Timing of the call for proposals*

In some cases, the time available for preparing and submitting the applications is too short. This is particularly problematic for calls that require applications with a high level of complexity and technical features. Not allowing enough time for the preparation of project proposals translates into lower quality applications.

Launching complex calls for proposals at the end of the programming period implies strict deadlines both for the selection of the operations and the implementation of the projects. This also puts a lot of pressure on the MAs/IBs and beneficiaries.

## 4.2.3. Human resources

Issues related to the human resources involved in the selection of operations affect the vast majority of the call for proposal analysed. This is particularly relevant for the appraisal step, where the burden of the assessment of the criteria is particularly significant for the involved personnel.

In several cases, the personnel involved in the appraisal step, especially the members of the Evaluation Committee, do not work full time on the evaluation of proposals, but this task adds up to their usual workload. This implies that each evaluator has limited time to dedicate to the assessment of the proposals.

Another important element to consider is whether external evaluators are involved in the process. If not managed properly, the recruitment of the external experts could be quite lengthy. In few cases, the evaluators were selected only after the submission of applications was closed, considerably delaying the proposal evaluation phase. In other cases, communication challenges between the Evaluation Committee and the external experts were reported.

Problems concerning human resources also include the shortage of technical skills, the high turnover and the scarce experience of the staff and/or experts.

It is important to note that the problems related to human resources do not only affect the MAs/IBs but also the applicants. Indeed, some applicants, especially public entities, do not have adequate project management or technical skills and usually need to hire consultants to respond to the requests and the criteria set in the calls for proposals. This increases the applicants' costs to participate in both in terms of time and financial resources.

### 4.2.4. Methods and Tools

#### 4.2.4.1. Selection methods

The issues covered here are related to the governance of the call for proposals and the actual selection process. In other words, the focus is on the design of the process, the management structure and, in particular, the way criteria have been assessed.

The definition and guidelines on the methodology on how to assess the selection criteria seem particularly relevant. Indeed, the lack of guidelines or methodologies allows for a high degree of uncertainty in the interpretation and causes delays and inconsistencies in the proposal evaluation outcomes. On the other hand, having too strict, or too complex and rigorous methodologies to assess the criteria may limit the need (and benefits) of the evaluation expertise and do not allow to capture unique features of the proposal e.g. innovation, excellence.

In some cases, the assessment of the criteria lacks transparency, as the outcome of the assessment and/or the given score is not substantiated by the evaluators' comments and justified on the basis of the assessment methodology.

#### 4.2.4.2. IT and communication tools

The lack of adequate IT tools in support of each step of the selection process delays the selection of operations. Suitable IT tools are particularly relevant for the proposal appraisal and contract signing steps.

The lack of IT tools in support of criteria evaluation has been identified as an important issue by several MAs/IBs. Indeed, it makes the evaluation process lengthy and burdensome, especially when a high number of criteria have to be assessed. However, introducing a new system can be also burdensome (at least initially) while a high standardization and clarity in the definition of the criteria are required for it to be effective. For example, in some OPs the system automatically assesses some of the criteria on the basis of the information inserted by the beneficiaries.

The lack of IT tools and e-signature features may cause delays in the contract signature phase. This has been particularly true for the calls for proposals whose contracts were supposed to be signed when there were travel restrictions due to Covid-19 which heavily affected the ability of the beneficiaries to sign the documents in person.

In some OPs, despite the initial technical difficulties, the introduction of IT tools significantly improved the selection process.

### 4.3. Summarizing the main aspects of good practices

As highlighted in paragraph 4.1 and, in particular, in Table 13, several good practices have been identified in relation to managing effectively and efficiently the selection of operations. Most of these practices could be relatively easily transferable between different calls, OPs and even Member States. Transferability of the good practices implies that they are not necessarily referring to specific country (e.g. nationally-specific legislation) or a specific call (e.g. pre-defined beneficiary which is specific to a country) but that they can be relatively easily applied also in other contexts, thus representing lessons learned which can be more widely disseminated.

Good practices in the selection of operations can be divided into four distinct categories aiming at:

- *Setting up a clear intervention logic and effective targeting of the call;*
- *Reducing the administrative burden via digitalisation and standardisation;*
- *Ensuring sufficient human resources;*
- *Good communication during all stages of a call;*
- *Providing adequate and regular support to the applicants.*

The following paragraphs elaborate on each of these categories of good practices.

#### 4.3.1. Setting up a clear intervention logic and effective targeting of the call

The findings of the present study suggest several good practices related to setting up a clear intervention logic and achieving an effective call targeting. A strong participatory approach is crucial in carrying out a needs assessment and in designing the call to ensure accurate targeting and focus.

Engaging with expert associations can provide a good understanding of the needs and segmentation of the target groups. Conducting information campaigns, focus groups or surveys during the call design can ensure that the aim of the call is clear to the potential applicants and selection criteria are better targeted. It is also advisable, whenever possible, to use online public consultation tools to reach a wider audience.

After the implementation of a call for proposals, an evaluation of the entire process should take place to identify challenges, problems and lessons learnt to improve the process in future calls.

Fostering communication, exchanging information, and sharing lessons learned among personnel involved in the design and implementation of similar interventions, within and outside the OP, can improve the intervention logic based on previously launched calls and prevents similar mistakes. This approach contributes to increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the selection process.

#### 4.3.2. Reducing the administrative burden via digitalisation and standardisation

The adoption of a fully digitalized application process, supported by high-quality IT tools and sufficiently trained staff, can significantly reduce administrative burden. Digital solutions that enable automatic controls on application completeness can prevent the rejection of good project applications due to administrative errors.

IT-based systems can also facilitate quicker assessment of applications, automatic communication with applicants for clarification requests, and provide timely feedback on the status of the applications.

Interoperability with different national registries is another good practice to reduce administrative burden. This eliminates the need for applicants to collect official documents from different sources, making it possible to gather registry information automatically from other institutions.

Requesting certain documentary proof at the end of the selection process, before contract signature, can also reduce administrative burden by avoiding unnecessary collection of documents that are irrelevant for the evaluation of the application.

Use of standardized application forms and templates, including for contracts to be signed, is found to be extremely useful for both applicants and MAs. This allows for easy comparison of applications and saves time during the contract drafting phase.

### 4.3.3. Ensuring sufficient human resources

Many of the problems identified in the selection process can be linked back to issues with human resources, such as difficulties in finding external evaluators, lack of proper experience in managing calls for proposals, inconsistency in applying selection criteria, and lack of specific knowledge in certain topics such as sector-related e.g. legal framework, public procurement, and state aid.

The analysis carried out has highlighted several good practices in this area. In some cases, the MAs have put efforts into ensuring highly experienced staff (internal and external) to conduct the selection process and provide feedback to the applicants. A good practice is to ensure that a framework contract is in place for the provision of external assistance in the proposal evaluation, which different public institutions can rely on when needed. Additionally, the exchange of experienced evaluators and civil servants among different institutions or offices for the evaluation of a specific call can be beneficial.

Another highly valued practice is the discussion of the proposals' appraisal methodology and the agreement on a consistent evaluation approach during the initial meetings of the evaluation committee (with the participation of internal and external evaluators). Several meetings can be organised to agree on how to treat specific cases encountered during the selection process consistently.

Involving specialized experts, such as legal experts with expertise in ownership issues, state aid and public procurement is also considered a good practice, as it may be appropriate to involve experts with knowledge of horizontal principles.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that ensuring sufficient human resources, although relevant for all stages of the selection of operations, is particularly important for the appraisal of proposals and the selection of projects. During the preparation of a call (steps 2 and 3 of the selection process), a good inter-institutional/inter-sectoral cooperation produces a good understanding of the needs of the target groups and helps with the clarity of the criteria.

### 4.3.4. Good communication activities

Good communication activities are crucial for the success of the selection process, with several good practices identified across multiple stages of the selection such as launching the call, receiving and evaluating applications, and informing applicants of the results.

During the drafting of the call for proposal documents, involving target groups through consultation tools such as public consultation portals and sectoral associations' channels can increase the quality of the call, better targeting and addressing the needs.

Information campaigns such as info-days during the launch of the calls (step 5 of the selection process) are very useful, especially if conducted in an interactive mode, to allow questions from the potential applicants in order to improve clarity of the call objectives and the selection criteria.

As already mentioned above, during the appraisal of the proposals and selection of projects (step 7), the use of an IT platform for all the communication activities is a good practice. Such activities can take the form of bilateral exchanges with individual applicants, or of FAQs with questions and answers visible to all.

The results of the selection process can be also communicated via an IT platform or through email. Providing a detailed explanation of the scoring process and clear feedback to the applicants is a good practice, which allows learning lessons and improving in possible future applications.

Often applicants are informed on the outcome of each selection step, during the evaluation process: evaluation of the administrative requirements, evaluation of the eligibility, assessment of the quality, etc. There are also examples where the successful and unsuccessful applicants receive additional phone calls (in addition to the information in electronic format) which allow to provide further clarifications on the scoring and selection process, and represent a learning opportunity.

To summarize, good communication activities are important for all the stages of the selection process but especially for: the step of launching a call for proposal, submission of applications, appraisal of the proposals and selection of the projects and, finally, informing the applicants on the outcome of the selection and complaint management.

### 4.3.5. Regular support to applicants

The analysed OPs provide a questions and answers service during the call period, and all answers are published on a publicly available platform for potential applicants to access. In addition, during the call information campaigns, it is considered a good practice to provide advice, lessons learned, or guidelines based on previous experiences with similar calls. This helps applicants developing higher quality applications and increases the chances of success.

The possibility to communicate with applicants during the evaluation process is also a good practice, which allows for clarification or submission of missing administrative documents if needed.

For infrastructural projects, JASPERS support in the application process has been found to be very important and useful. Some countries are considering introducing JASPERS-like support, organized with national experts, even for smaller-scale projects. This approach is believed to improve project design, facilitate the implementation process, and ensure the sustainability of results.

Furthermore, communicating the results of the selection and award procedure (step 8 of the selection process) is essential for fostering learning and improving applicants' capacity to submit quality applications.

It is also considered a good practice to offer training on contract management to selected beneficiaries to avoid mistakes and irregularities during contract implementation.



## 5. Recommendations

The analysis of practices, procedures, and criteria used for the selection of operations presented in this report made it possible to identify some good practices that MS authorities have been applying, and that could help other administrations streamlining the selection process and overcome common challenges. Drawing upon the findings of the analysis, several recommendations can be outlined as in the following paragraphs.

### 1. Exploit peer learning and knowledge sharing potential

The study found that practices on the selection of operations differ considerably across MS and OPs. Most of the OPs analysed in the present study provided information on good practices related to specific steps or activities of the selection process that could be shared with other OPs in order to support Managing Authorities (MAs) in improving their selection processes. Therefore, we recommend that the considerable peer learning and knowledge sharing potential is further exploited through several means such as informal exchanges across OPs within the same country or similar OPs across Europe. This could also include participation in specific Peer2Peer+ exchange programs/platforms, and active participation in other networks, expert groups, communities of practices, etc. DG REGIO should proactively encourage experience sharing initiatives, disseminating examples of efficient operation selection practices and procedures to all relevant Member State authorities.

### 2. Define clear intervention logic of the call

Clear intervention logic and a focused approach are important preconditions for a smooth selection process. The study found that an accurate and clear definition of the intervention logic and a clear focus are fundamental to ensure that calls documents, selection criteria, and target groups are also clear and understandable both for the applicants and the authorities' staff in charge of the selection process. When these preconditions are fulfilled, better-quality applications are usually submitted, which leads to a smoother and more effective selection process. To facilitate this, the authority may:

- **Promote a participatory approach** during the call preparation and design. Involving stakeholders as well as experts in the preparation of the interventions and the definition of the call for proposal conditions and selection criteria helps to ensure that the call is correctly focused and the intervention is highly relevant. This also has positive spill-overs on the proposal appraisal step.
- **Build up the call for proposals based on lessons learned** from previous interventions. It is advisable to start developing calls for proposals based on past experiences and to undergo a revision of the previously launched calls to assess the strength and weakness of the call design (clarity, criteria, focus, budgeting...), also drawing upon conclusions of proposal evaluations of previously launched calls. This practice ensures that lessons learned are taken into account to improve the selection process further and avoid repeating previous mistakes. When similar interventions have not been financed by the OP, the authority could take inspiration from similar initiatives launched by other OPs (e.g., other regional OPs within the country or OPs from other countries with a similar context or needs).
- **Define a limited number of well-targeted selection criteria.** The quality of selection criteria heavily affects the selection process. Too high number of criteria is associated with longer selection processes, and vague and unclear criteria are likely to hinder the proposal evaluation phase. The selection criteria should be of a reasonable number and able to measure the extent to which a project is relevant to the territory's needs and identify whether it is likely to produce a sizable positive impact. The criteria should be clearly defined, and the methodology for quantifying, evaluating, and attributing scores shall be

also clearly defined for each criterion. This helps increase the quality of applications, facilitate proposal evaluation, and reduce the number of complaints and legal appeals. A clear scoring and evaluation methodology leaves less room for arbitrary interpretation while enhancing transparency. In order to design clear and effective criteria, it is recommended to use a participatory approach in the definition of the criteria and test the clarity of the criteria with a potential applicants and evaluators before launching the call.

### 3. Reduce the administrative burden and streamline processes

When selection procedures are particularly burdensome and lengthy, the attractiveness of the European funds as well as the efficiency of the investments may drop. To reduce the administrative burden for both the applicants and authorities, it is highly recommended to:

- **Digitalise the entire selection process and improve interoperability.** Digitalisation is key to streamlining the selection process. To get the most out of digitalisation, public authorities should not only focus on individual steps of the process but ensure that the information systems and the IT tools used across different steps of the selection process are, as much as possible, integrated and interoperable. This allows a smooth and efficient flow of information from the application submission up to the signature of the contracts. Complete digitalisation can reduce the risk of incorrect or omitted information and enhance the transparency of the process. Ensuring external interoperability with other databases and registers is of utmost importance. Indeed, linking the submission and evaluation tools with external systems could allow to automatically fill in parts of the application form, as well as automate some eligibility checks. Given the high workload that administrations have to deal with during the selection process, it is also important to mention that digitalisation helps to increase staff productivity and mitigate possible human resource shortages.
- **Standardise processes and documents.** The standardisation of the selection process is of utmost importance to achieve simplification and to reduce the administrative burden. In fact, standardisation lays the foundation for process automation which will notably speed up and ease the entire selection process. It is recommended to use standardised application forms and templates across call for proposals, including contracts, to make the process more manageable and reduce errors.
- **Ensure effective complaint management.** Effective complaint management is essential to avoid delays and blockages in the selection process. To be able to continue with the contracting phase while assessing the complaints, authorities could consider keeping aside a financial buffer or reserve.

### 4. Ensure sufficient human resources and their effective management

In many of the observed OPs, the human resources available for the selection process, especially in the appraisal phase, were insufficient in terms of both numbers and required competences. This is particularly evident when assessing and selecting projects, which require specific technical and sectorial skills. As a result, many OPs had to involve external personnel, which can be challenging to manage. It is difficult to plan the number and types of human resources required before the launch of the call, as the number and nature of applications cannot be anticipated entirely. Nonetheless, there are certain practices that can help the authorities overcome these challenges:

- **Mobilise external personnel and the evaluators in advance.** Mobilising human resources needed for the proposal's appraisal timely is one of the main challenges that authorities face. Therefore, it is recommended to plan the number of evaluators required in advance, based on previous experience or estimations. Authorities can also use framework contracts, inter-institutional exchanges or other means to have a pool of experts readily available and speed up hiring of experts when necessary.

- **Train evaluators and ensure consistency.** People with different backgrounds are usually involved in the appraisal step and, therefore, it is essential to ensure consistency in evaluations. To achieve this, authorities should train evaluators on the context and methodology to be used for the appraisal. Clear and detailed guidelines that facilitate a consistent approach should also be provided.

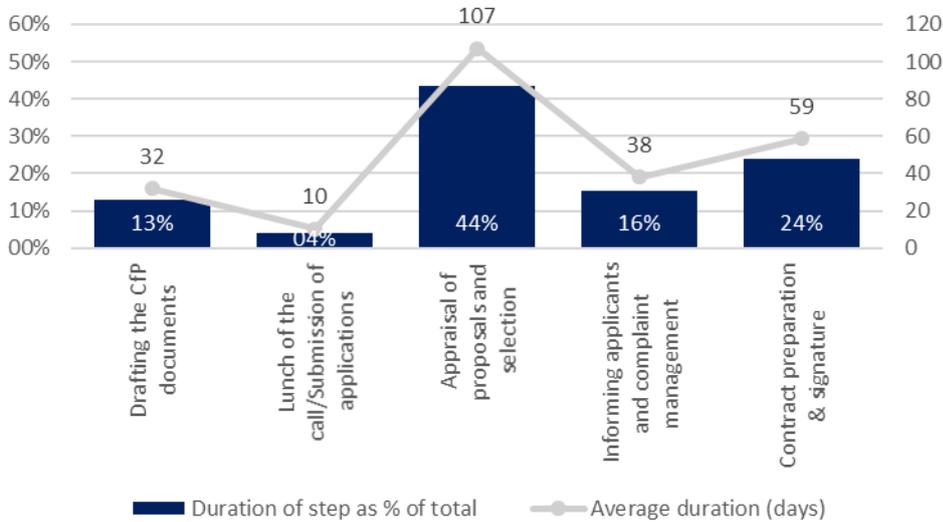
#### **5. Ensure effective communication and support to applicants**

Effective communication between authorities and applicants is crucial for increasing transparency and reaching a wider audience of interested applicants. This is particularly important, in addition to supporting applicants effectively, to ensure higher quality of applications, especially during the proposal preparation phase. To effectively communicate and support the applicants, it is recommended to:

- In addition to standard communication channels, **utilize social media to broaden the reach of the call for proposals.** In recent years, social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become powerful tools for promoting calls for proposals and reaching a wider pool of potential applicants.
- **Make available wide range of support measures,** including Q&A, information sessions, specialised training for the beneficiaries on specific aspects of the applications (e.g. business plan, market analysis, financial projections, etc.). When appropriate, individual pre-application counselling, engaging also sectoral experts, can be very effective.
- **Maintain an open and accessible communication channel.** An open communication channel with the applicants, from the submission phase until contract signature, is important for reducing misunderstandings, preventing complaints and building mutual trust.  
**Provide feedback and suggestions, including to non-selected applicants.** Providing detailed feedback to non-selected applicants can increase transparency and motivate them to apply for future funding opportunities.

## 6. Annex: Additional tables and figures

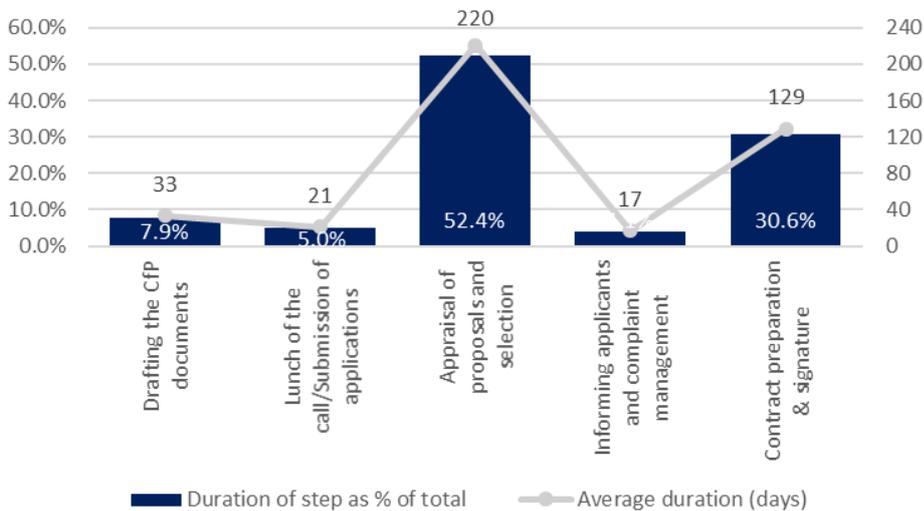
### A. 1 Average FTE days needed to carry out the selection process for competitive open-ended calls



Note: Step 2 and 3 have not been considered as are usually carried out at the beginning of the programming period and data on FTE days for these steps are not included in our checklist.

Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

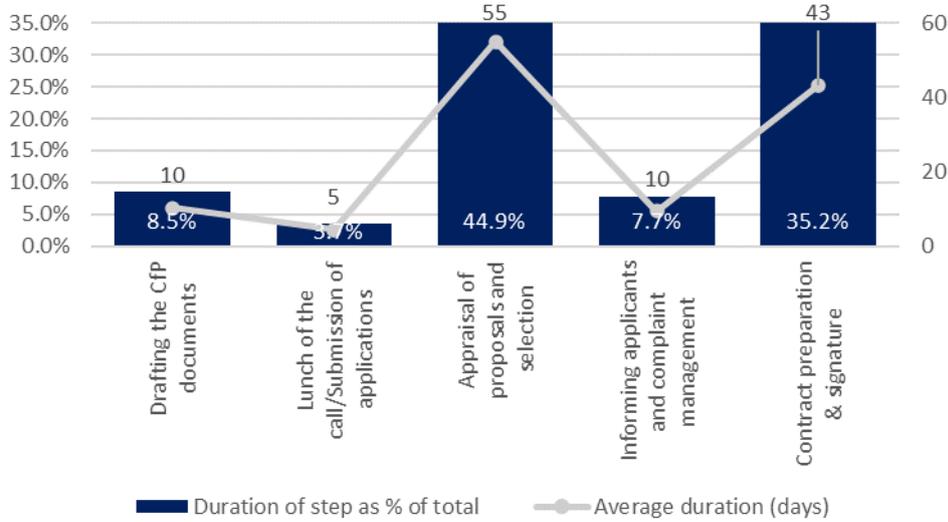
### A. 2 Average FTE days needed to carry out the selection process for competitive closed-ended calls



Note: Step 2 and 3 have not been considered as are usually carried out at the beginning of the programming period and data on FTE days for these steps are not included in our checklist.

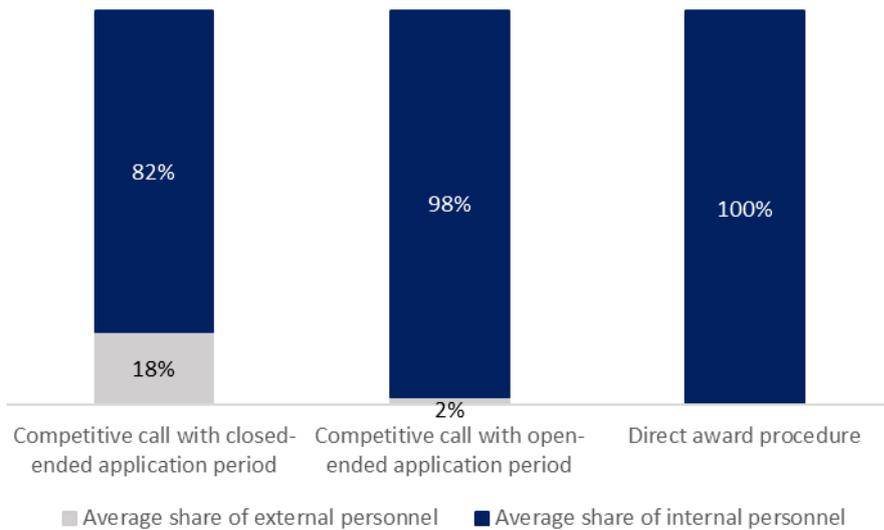
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**A. 3 Average FTE days needed to carry out the selection process for competitive direct awards**



Note: Step 2 and 3 have not been considered as are usually carried out at the beginning of the programming period and data on FTE days for these steps are not included in our checklist.  
 Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**A. 4 Average share of external personnel involved in step 5 by type of call (N=77)**



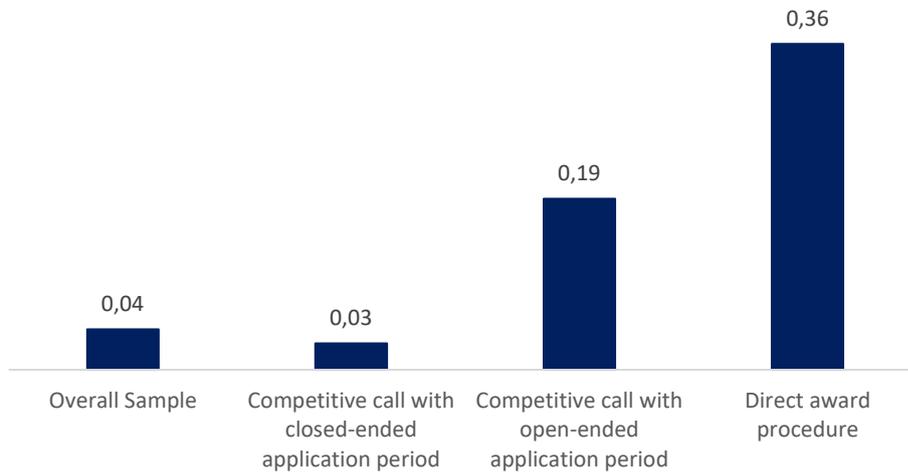
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**A. 5 Distribution of calls by the number of clarifications request per applications**

Number of clarification request per applications	Number of calls	Percentage distribution of calls
0	13	15.85%
0-0.1	8	9.76%
0.1-0.2	5	6.10%
0.2-0.3	4	4.88%
0.3-0.4	3	3.66%
0.4-0.5	2	2.44%
0.5-0.6	1	1.22%
0.6-0.7	1	1.22%
0.7-0.8	4	4.88%
0.8-0.9	4	4.88%
0.9-1	6	7.32%
>1	13	15.85%

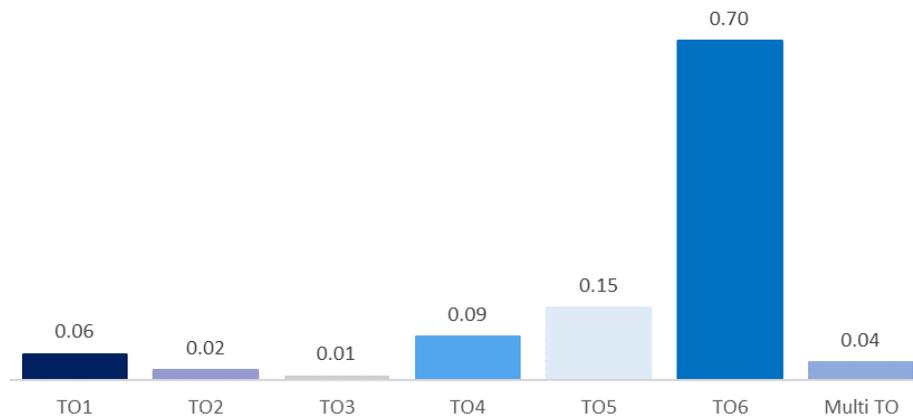
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**A. 6 Average number of FTE days per applications needed to carry out step 8 by type of call (N=72)**



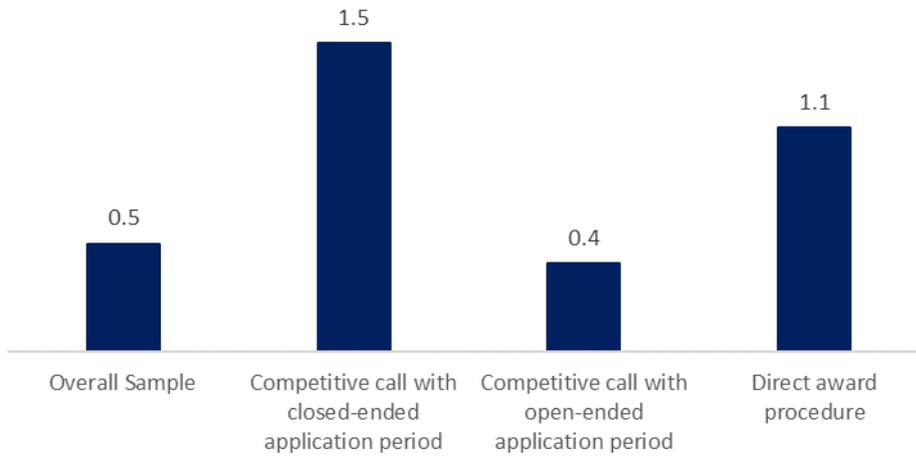
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**A. 7 Average number of FTE days per applications needed to carry out step 8 by TO (N=71)**



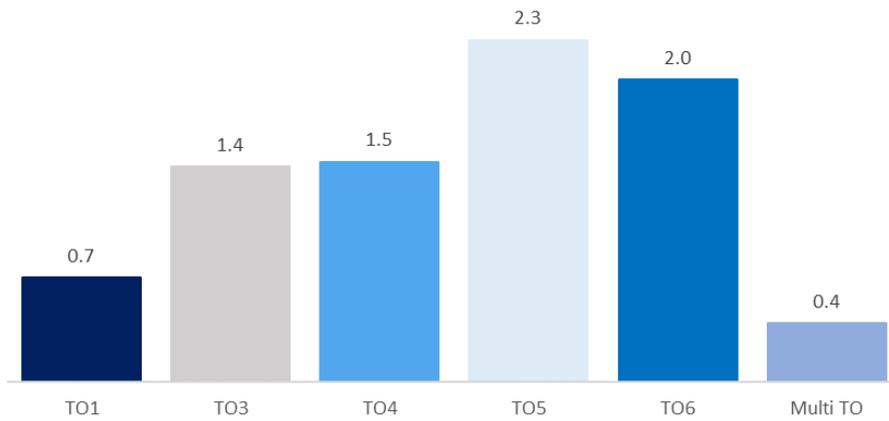
Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**A. 8 Average number of FTE days per contract signed needed to carry out step 9 by type of call (N=65)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022

**A. 9 Average number of FTE days per contract signed needed to carry out step 9 by TO (N=64)**



Source: Ismeri, Ecorys, Ramboll 2022





## GETTING IN TOUCH WITH THE EU

### In person

All over the European Union there are hundreds of Europe Direct information centres. You can find the address of the centre nearest you at:

[https://europa.eu/european-union/contact\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en)

### On the phone or by email

Europe Direct is a service that answers your questions about the European Union. You can contact this service:

- by freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (certain operators may charge for these calls),
- at the following standard number: +32 22999696 or
- by email via: [https://europa.eu/european-union/contact\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en)

## FINDING INFORMATION ABOUT THE EU

### Online

Information about the European Union in all the official languages of the EU is available on the Europa website at: [https://europa.eu/european-union/index\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/index_en)

### EU publications

You can download or order free and priced EU publications at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publications>. Multiple copies of free publications may be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local information centre (see [https://europa.eu/european-union/contact\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en)).

### EU law and related documents

For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1952 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

### Open data from the EU

The EU Open Data Portal (<http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en>) provides access to datasets from the EU. Data can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes.

