Interreg
Greece-Bulgaria
STRENGTHEN
European Regional Development Fund

EUROPEAN UNION

"MEMORANDUM OF COOPERATION (MOC)"

among the STRENGHTEN project partners*

2023

Interreg
Greece-Bulgaria
STRENGTHEN
European Regional Development Fund

EUROPEAN UNION

The contents of this document are sole responsibility of Chamber of Serres and of all STRENGTHEN project partners and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union, the participating countries the Managing Authority and the Joint Secretariat.

The Project is co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and by national funds of the countries participating in the Interreg V-A "Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020" Cooperation Programme.

*THE STRENGTHEN PROJECT PARTNERSHIP:

Chamber of Serres	**Greece**	**Lead Beneficiary (PB1)**
Lifelong Learning Center of Region of Central Macedonia SA	**Greece**	**Beneficiary 2 (PB2)**
Chamber of Commerce and Industry - Blagoevgrad	**Bulgaria**	**Beneficiary 3 (PB3)**
European information and consultancy center- BG regions	**Bulgaria**	**Beneficiary 4 (PB4)**

Article 1: Purpose and Scope of the MoC

This Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) outlines a framework for the STRENGHTEN project partners in order to engage them in the most efficient way in the implementation of STRENGHTEN project objectives, both during the procedures for the successful implementation of the project results and after its completion.

The overall objective of the project "STRENGTHEN" is to enhance the competitiveness, sustainability and management capacity of targeted SMEs in the cross border area by stimulating cross border cooperation, enabling the promotion of local products and services and improving services and tools for business support and internationalization. The objective will be reached through targeted actions to support the business networking and partnership of SMEs in cross border area and promote the export activity of Greek and Bulgarian products and services through participation in trade fairs and business missions.

Moreover, the project aims at exploiting opportunities for cross border cooperation by developing common mechanisms and actions on strategic issues, such as the creation of conditions for the future development of competitive cross-border clusters.

During and beyond the STRENGTHEN project's duration, the partners' cooperation Network will play a critical role in improving entrepreneurial support systems for SMEs in the cross border area – through joint actions– focusing on removing the barriers and bottlenecks for SMEs thus strengthening business survival and providing support to specific SMEs.

For this reason, this document is essential, as it specifies the key principles of the STRENGTHEN Network's function, outlines a basic framework of Network objectives and key aspects of the actions to be accomplished, and affirms the STRENGTHEN partners' commitment to expanding the Network to other territories.

Article 2: STRENGTHEN Project Description

The STRENGTHEN project (full project title: *"Strengthening the entrepreneurship culture and collaboration in the eligible programme area"*) is a two-country collaboration project including Greece, and Bulgaria.

The development of extroversion and exports is one of the main levers in order to overcome the intense problems created by the economic crisis and the prolonged recession in both countries. In this context, the initiative for strengthening the entrepreneurship culture and collaboration in the eligible programme area, aims to highlight, promote and enhance the extroversion of quality Greek and Bulgarian products and services by stimulating their export activity, upgrading their general international trade, their international networking, the search for partners, etc.

The project idea was initially developed by the PPs, and especially the two Chambers in Serres and Blagoevgrad together with the LLC of Region of Central Macedonia SA and the EICC-BG regions, which aim (in addition to business support and actions targeting the entrepreneurship climate) at capacity building through the provision of non-formal, general adult education and the formulation of joint strategy for the enhancement of collaboration in the cross-border area.

The common cross border problems and challenges to be tackled are the following:

1. SMEs encounter resource constraints, that seem particularly prevalent among smaller, newly established firms. Finding business finance is always a challenge that the project will try to overcome,
2. One of the main challenges is that SMEs often lack experience and information on foreign countries and markets. Businesses are built on networks of investors, partners and team members. That may be challenging for those with little networking experience,
3. Inadequate human development and skills has been always a major barrier and especially many SMEs do not have specialised staff to deal with exports and quality management.
   The project "STRENGTHEN" comes to provide a solution to this bottleneck with the provision of training seminars in the field of Export Trade and Food Safety & Quality Management by recognizing that human resource training is a function that involves developing employees' skills, knowledge and abilities to meet the organization's needs. The objective of human capital development and skills is to create competent, motivated and high-performing personnel that are prepared to meet future demands,
4. SMEs in the cross-border area have been rather slow in expanding their activity to the other side of the border; the borderline remains a barrier and business activity is often limited to local boundaries.

The innovative character of the project "STRENGTHEN" arises from the collaboration, the joining of forces and the recognition, by business intermediate organisations, policy makers

and productive interest groups of the need to create a cross border collaborative network of SMEs.

Moreover, the promotion and support of SMEs business networking (eg. clusters) in order to establish economies of scale and better access to markets brings a new aspect in the cross border cooperation agenda. The cross border area is in need of structures and facilities that will enhance the entrepreneurship and competitiveness in the area, especially towards those vulnerable to the risk of unemployment; women, young people, people with disabilities, etc.

Entrepreneurs will benefit from training seminars and develop business knowledge, upgrade their skills and attitudes. Through participation in training programmes focused on thematic topics, targeted SMEs, business executives, self-employed will be able to stimulate the market and steer their business to new, dynamic and competitive markets. Also they will participate in networking activities to enhance their extroversion capacity.

Young unemployed potential entrepreneurs will benefit from the project by giving them access to sector relevant networks (customers, suppliers) as they will get in touch with established entrepreneurs in their sector of interest

Policy makers will benefit from the project by participating in focus groups for the investigation of competitive clusters and the formation of a joint strategy and action plan for the design of future cluster policies

The STRENGTHEN project partners and stakeholders function as a Network to ensure that the project is implemented successfully and that tangible results and a positive impact are achieved both in the short-term and in the long term.

The STRENGTHEN project partners commit themselves to closely collaborate and to do their utmost to achieve the goals of the STRENGTHEN project.

Article 3: The STRENGTHEN Network Key Principles of Good Conduct

For the proper operation of the project completion processes, the Lead Partner and Partners have agreed by signing the current document to adhere to the following Key Principles of Good Conduct. These principles maintain balance and respect between the partners but also guarantee the success of the project:

- Mutual trust, respect, honesty and commitment
- A balance of authority and knowledge sharing
- Clear, transparent and accessible communication
- Transparency
- Publicity
- Avoidance of conflict of interest
- Equal treatment
- Proportionality
- Non-discrimination
- Appropriateness of deadlines
- Roles, procedures, and conventions have all been agreed upon
- The project's mission, goals, objectives, measurable outcomes and accountability have all been articulated and agreed upon.

The above key principles should be faithfully followed by all partners throughout the STRENGTHEN project and after its completion.

Article 4: STRENGTHEN Partners General Obligations

In order to achieve the goals of the project and to have positive results, the STRENGTHEN partnership signed below, has the obligation to take the following actions:

- Follow the law and contracting norms when doing their obligations.
- Avoid taking any action that could result in a prospective or actual conflict of interest.
- Maintain the confidentiality of data and personal information.
- Report any conflict of interest, irregularity, suspected fraud or fraud to the Joint Secretariat (JS) and to the Managing Authority (MA) as soon as possible.
- Do not exploit the knowledge they have at their disposal for personal gain.
- When a conflict of interest occurs, abstain from voting or participating in the decision-making process.
- Ensure that duties are distributed transparently among organization personnel who are formally involved in project operations; prevent any purposeful act or omission that results in the misappropriation or wrongful retention of funds, such as the use or presentation of false, erroneous or incomplete statements or papers.
- Ensure that any information or communication pertaining to the project's activity is readily available.
- Adhere to the standards of ethical behavior and fairness in their actions, making decisions based on objective criteria rather than bias or prejudice.

Article 5: STRENGTHEN Partners' Commitment

The STRENGTHEN project partners, during and after project implementation, commit to:

- Make joint efforts and available resources between project partners (who freely agree to participate) in order to enhance the competitiveness, sustainability and management capacity of targeted SMEs in the cross border area.
- Ensure multi-level coordination among partnership members in order to promote their actions and therefore the STRENGTHEN project's impact.
- Promote the collaboration among the SMEs in the eligible programme area.
- Promote communication and awareness-raising and disseminate the outcomes of the STRENGTHEN project through as many channels as feasible (short, medium, and long-term).
- Expand the project to more areas.
- Maintain and strengthen the cooperation Network formed between project partners and essential stakeholders as a result of the STRENGTHEN project after its implementation.
- Make joint efforts to improve the project's outcomes with the purpose of accelerating the training processes for entrepreneurs to meet the demands of the modern market.
- Develop / Strengthen cross-border cooperation networks in order to improve entrepreneurial support systems for SMEs.
- Make efforts to disseminate and inform the general public about the STRENGTHEN project's results.
- Communicate STRENGTHEN project's experiences, actions and outcomes to competent bodies and to the general public.
- Encourage entrepreneurs and other potential beneficiaries to actively participate in training seminars offered for the goal of developing business knowledge, upgrade their skills and attitudes.
- Encourage entrepreneurs and other potential beneficiaries to actively participate in networking activities to enhance their extroversion capacity.
- Encourage policy makers to participate in focus group for the investigation of competitive cluster and the formation of joint strategy and action plan for the design of the future cluster policies.
- Encourage young unemployed potential entrepreneurs to participate in the project's actions and gain access to sector relevant networks (customers, suppliers) by getting in touch with established entrepreneurs in the sector of interest
- Attempt to provide information to the general public in the most direct and efficient ways possible, so that all interested potential beneficiaries obtain the information they require for the development of their business knowledge.

Article 6: Liability, Representation, Termination and Amendments/Modifications

6.1. Liability: Nothing in this agreement is intended to form a legally enforceable agreement and as a result, neither party will be liable if it fails to comply with any of the MoC's terms. Each party is responsible for how it fulfills its responsibilities under this MoC and no liability will be placed on another.

6.2. Representation: Nothing in this MoC should be interpreted as granting any party the right to represent another to third parties, including the press and media and no right of agency should be construed as a result.

6.3. Termination: The parties are able to terminate the MoC at any time, with notice, unless the due date is less than one month.

6.4. Amendments/Modifications: Amendments and/or Modifications to this MoC may be made with the mutual written agreement of the parties.

Article 7: Validity of the MoC

This Memorandum of Cooperation enters into force upon signature and is valid until **31/12/2026**, unless expressly denouncing party at the outset, deemed automatically extended for annual periods at least one month in advance, except in the case of the previously mentioned free extinction.

The parties indicate their agreement with this Memorandum of Cooperation by their signatures below:

Interreg
Greece-Bulgaria
STRENGTHEN
European Regional Development Fund

EUROPEAN UNION

Signed by:

Lead Beneficiary (PB1)
SERRES 30/05/2023
The President

Athanasios Malliaras

Beneficiary 2 (PB2)
The President

ΚΕΔΕΜ ΠΕΡΙΦΕΡΕΙΑΚΗΣ ΚΕΝΤΡΙΚΗΣ ΜΑΚΕΔΟΝΙΑΣ
ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΔΙΑ ΒΙΟΥ ΜΑΘΗΣΗΣ
ΚΕΝΤΡΙΚΟ: ΜΕΛΕΝΙΚΙΤΣΙ ΣΕΡΡΩΝ
ΑΦΜ 094 406 952 - ΔΟΥ ΣΕΡΡΩΝ
ΑΡ. ΓΕΜΗ: 113267752000

PANAGIOTIS SPYROPOULOS

Beneficiary 3 (PB3)

Търговско-промишлена палата Благоевград

ROMEO SHATEV

Beneficiary 4 (PB4)

ЕИКЦ - БГ региони • БЛАГОЕВГРАД

ADRIANA KRASTEVA