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Regional Development Agency Centre
Final Report

**Theme 2 “Evaluation of the interventions targeting digitalisation activities for
the benefit of citizens, companies and governments”
January 2026**

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CONTENT

LIST OF ACRONYMS.....	4
GLOSSARY OF TERMS.....	5
1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	6
2. INTRODUCTION.....	8
2.1 Purpose and Objectives of the Evaluation.....	8
2.2 Evaluation Questions.....	9
3. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY.....	10
3.1 Application of the Evaluation Methodology.....	10
3.2 Limitations and Challenges.....	13
4. CONTEXT.....	15
5. EVALUATION FINDINGS.....	19
5.1. EVALUATION CRITERION „RELEVANCE.”.....	19
EQ1. To what extent do the initial objectives of the intervention still correspond to the needs identified at the local, regional, and EU levels?	19
5.2. EVALUATION CRITERION „EFFECTIVENESS.”.....	23
EQ2. What changes can be observed in relation to the specific objectives of the intervention?	23
EQ3. For whom, in what ways, and under what circumstances does the intervention produce the planned results?	26
EQ4. What are the barriers to implementation, and what measures have been taken to mitigate them? What facilitated the implementation process?	30
EQ5. To what extent has Priority 2 led to the development of digital solutions in the public sector / the digitalisation of SMEs?	34
EQ6. What are the causal mechanisms that produce effects and what are their characteristics? How has the intervention been adapted to subsequent technological or scientific developments in the field of interest?	37
EQ7. To what extent are the costs associated with the interventions under Priority 2 justified by the benefits generated? Are there more efficient alternatives or significant differences between projects in the region or projects financed under other relevant programmes, such as the NRRP and PoCIDIF? What are the causes of these differences?	40
EQ8. To what extent can the interest shown in the launched calls be considered an indicator of efficiency?	44
EQ9. To what extent are the costs of digitalising public services / SMEs through Priority 2 justified by the overall benefits?.....	47
EQ10. To what extent do other projects/interventions of the administrative-territorial unit or SME in the field of digitalisation of public services/processes correlate with the project implemented under the Priority?.....	50
EQ11. How and to what extent are the requirements regarding the principles of sustainable development, equal opportunities and non-discrimination, and gender equality reflected in the contracted projects?	52
6. CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNT.....	54
6.1 LESSONS LEARNT AND BEST PRACTICES.....	56
7. RECOMMENDATIONS.....	57

Figure 1: Intervention logic of SO 1.2 – Capitalising on the benefits of digitalisation for citizens, companies, research organisations and public authorities.....	17
Figure 2: Intervention logic of SO 1.4 – Developing skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship (ERDF).....	18
Figure 3: Development needs of the region (LPA)	21
Figure 4: Distribution of projects submitted under Call 2.1.1 by county and type of administrative-territorial unit.....	27
Figure 5: Distribution of projects submitted under Call 2.2 for SMEs	28
Figure 6: Perception of the attractiveness of the calls.....	46

Table 1. Evaluation Questions	9
Table 2: Data Collection Methods Applied.....	10
Table 3: Status of Priority 2 by launched calls.....	44
Table 4: Examples from the case studies — correlations and complementarities identified.....	48
Table 5: : Examples of integration of horizontal principles in the projects analysed through case studies	54
Table 6: Examples of integration of horizontal principles in the projects analysed through case studies.....	54

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

Acronym	Explanation
RDA	Centre Regional Development Agency
MA RPC	Managing Authority of the Regional Programme Centre
MA	Managing Authority
BI	Business Intelligence/ Set of applications and technologies that enable data collection, analysis and visualisation for informed decision-making
CAD	Computer-Aided Design
CAM	Computer-Aided Manufacturing
CCE	Evaluation Coordination Committee
CE	European Commission
SEN	Special Educational Needs
ToR	Terms of Reference
MC	Monitoring Committee
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
SEC	Scientific Evaluation Committee
EBT	Theory-Based Evaluation
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning / Integrated IT system
FEDR	European Regional Development Fund
IRSE	Socio-Educational Risk Index
GD	Government Decision
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
IoT	Internet of Things/ A network of smart devices
MIPE	Ministry of Investments and European Projects
MySMIS	System for recording and storing, in computerised form, data relating to each operation, necessary for monitoring, evaluation, financial management, verifications and audits under the operational programmes managed at national level
PO	Policy Objective
SO	Specific Objective
TO	Technical Offer
GED	Government Emergency Ordinance
EP	Evaluation Plan
EPSR	European Pillar of Social Rights
RDP	Regional Development Plan
NIECCP	National Integrated Energy and Climate Change Plan
IP	Intervention Priority 2
P	Priority under the Regional Programme Centre
OP	Operational Programme
RP Centre	Regional Programme Centre
RDC	Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions
RIS3 Centre	Centre Smart Specialisation Strategy
RPA	Robotic Process Automation
ROP	Regional Operational Programme
SCM	Supply Chain Management
RPCES	Regional Programme Centre Evaluation Service
TE	Evaluation Theme
ATU	Administrative-Territorial Unit

EU	European Union
GMI	Guaranteed Minimum Income

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Beneficiary: A local administrative-territorial unit (UAT) and/or small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) that has received funding and is responsible for managing the funding received through the Regional Programme Centre.

Potential beneficiary: All UATs and/or SMEs in the region.

Level of development in the region: The result of the conjunctive aggregation of the following indicators: GDP per capita at county level, share of persons with higher education, and share of persons receiving the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI).

Final beneficiaries: Residents of the areas benefiting from project implementation; private enterprises in the areas benefiting from project implementation; entrepreneurs and employees of private enterprises; residents of the areas benefiting from interaction with trained staff; private enterprises in the areas benefiting from projects implemented by public administrations; staff of financed SMEs.

Target group: Local and county-level UATs, UAT employees, private organisations/entrepreneurs providing digital or smart city solutions, entrepreneurs interested in development in beneficiary areas, SMEs, and organisations delivering training courses.

Digitalisation: The transformation of interactions, communications, relationships, business functions, and business models into digital processes. Digitalisation entails the implementation and maintenance of new systems, leading to the simplification of work processes and/or added value in services, depending on the specific nature of each business.

SMART City – smart city: A concept involving the large-scale use of digital and telecommunication technologies to improve services and service accessibility for the benefit of residents and businesses.

Cost per digitalised SME: The total cost of the intervention divided by the number of SMEs that received funding for the digitalisation of their activities.

Number of innovative digital solutions implemented: The number of digital solutions developed and implemented with a high degree of innovation.

Sustainability of digital solutions: The extent to which the implemented digital solutions are used in the long term.

Costs associated with the intervention: The sum of the costs required for the intervention, namely the project value, and the costs of operating and maintaining the intervention over its minimum lifespan. The costs are estimated in financial terms.

Benefits generated by the intervention: The positive results expected or estimated, based on an agreed model, to be produced by the intervention over its minimum lifespan. Compared with costs, whose value can be estimated in financial terms, benefits may be both economic and non-economic, the latter not being financially assessable at the time of the analysis. The inferential model of benefits adopted in the analysis also determines the sensitivity limits assumed.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EVALUATION OBJECTIVE

1. The overall objective of the evaluation of Evaluation Theme 2 is to analyse the implementation status and performance of the digitalisation interventions financed under Priority 2 “A Digital Region” of the Regional Programme Centre 2021–2027, by examining their relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence. The evaluation supports the decision-making process of the Managing Authority for the Regional Programme Centre by providing evidence-based conclusions and operational recommendations, relevant both for optimising current implementation and for informing the next programming period. The analysis focuses on the contribution of the interventions to the digital transformation of the regional economy and of local public administration, with particular emphasis on the implementation of Specific Objectives SO 1.2 and SO 1.4 and on their alignment with the objectives of the Regional Programme Centre, as well as with European and national strategic directions.
2. Given the early stage of implementation of the digitalisation interventions, the evaluation was primarily oriented towards analysing the intervention logic, the implementation framework, and the conditions required for results to materialise, rather than towards measuring final impact.

EVALUATION CONCLUSIONS

RELEVANCE AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

3. Priority 2 “A Digital Region” confirms its strategic relevance, being well aligned with European and national objectives on digital transformation and responding to persistent structural needs of the Centre Region, in particular the low level of digital maturity among SMEs and the fragmentation of digital processes in local public administrations. The interventions are perceived by beneficiaries as highly relevant to their immediate digitalisation needs, confirming the adequacy of the intervention design in relation to current digitalisation needs in the business environment and local public administration.

EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPLEMENTATION CAPACITY

4. At this stage, the intervention shows strong potential effectiveness. The first observable results indicate improvements in operational efficiency, productivity, and the quality of internal processes, especially among SMEs implementing integrated digital solutions for the first time, such as ERP, CRM, CAD/CAM, and cloud solutions.
5. The main factors driving progress are the beneficiaries’ internal capacity, organisational leadership, the quality of cooperation with IT providers and consultants, as well as open communication with the RDA Centre during the implementation stages. The difficulties identified relate mainly to the length of the evaluation and contracting stage, the perceived volume of administrative requirements in relation to beneficiaries’ capacity, and the limited availability of human resources with IT skills.
6. The financed projects mainly target basic technologies, which are appropriate to the current level of digital maturity. However, the gap between the rapid pace of digital technology development and the existing procedural framework highlights the need for evaluation criteria that are more

clearly oriented towards the intended results in use and the practical applicability of the proposed solutions, as well as for the recognition of technological equivalence.

ECONOMIC EFFICIENCY

7. The interventions financed under Priority 2 indicate a positive cost-benefit ratio, based on benefits already observed or anticipated by beneficiaries, such as time savings, reduced administrative burden, optimisation of internal workflows, and increased productivity. Compared with other national programmes, such as the NRRP and PoCIDIF, Priority 2 is perceived as more accessible and better adapted to basic digitalisation, especially for SMEs with limited administrative and technical capacity. However, overall efficiency is temporarily reduced by the length of the administrative stages and the low contracting rate, which delay the materialisation of benefits.

COHERENCE AND HORIZONTAL PRINCIPLES

8. The degree of correlation between Priority 2 projects and other digitalisation initiatives is moderate, but coherent with the current level of digital maturity of the beneficiaries. For most SMEs, Priority 2 projects represent their first structured investment in digitalisation, and coherence is therefore mainly reflected at the operational level.
9. The horizontal principles, namely sustainable development, equal opportunities and gender equality, are integrated into the intervention framework in a general manner, consistent with programme requirements, mainly through compliance with the procedural framework and the agreed conformity conditions. The sustainable development component is the most visible, through the digitalisation of processes and the reduction of resource consumption, while the strategic application of the other principles remains limited.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the current programming period, 2021–2027

10. Ensure a balance between administrative rigour and flexibility in the implementation of digitalisation projects, by accepting justified technical adjustments that do not affect project objectives and by using general support mechanisms to ensure a consistent interpretation of requirements, such as consolidated written clarifications, guidance notes or indicative examples on the expected level of technical detail, and thematic sessions of a general nature.
11. Increase the transparency and predictability of the evaluation and contracting stages, including through interim communications on the status of the evaluation process and by optimising the duration of procedures.
12. Provide differentiated support to beneficiaries, according to their level of digital maturity, with measures adapted both to beneficiaries undertaking their first digital investment and to those implementing more mature IT projects.
13. Facilitate learning and exchange of experience among beneficiaries, by disseminating lessons learned and examples of projects with visible operational results, in order to support the effective use of digital solutions and improve the quality of future projects.

For the next programming period, post-2027

14. Orient funding guidelines towards the intended results in use and the operational impact of digital solutions, while maintaining essential technical requirements.
15. Introduce a digital maturity screening mechanism for beneficiaries, as an ex ante guidance tool to support the design and calibration of funding calls.

16. Structure funding calls according to beneficiaries' level of digital maturity, distinguishing between basic digitalisation and more advanced projects, with requirements and evaluation mechanisms adapted to project complexity.
17. Improve the clarity and coherence of the guidelines through early testing and calibration mechanisms during the drafting stage, to support a consistent understanding of requirements and improve the quality of submitted projects.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Purpose and Objectives of the Evaluation

18. The evaluation of programmes financed under the European Union Cohesion Policy for the 2021–2027 period is carried out in accordance with the provisions of Regulation (EU) No 1060/2021 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021. In this context, the Multiannual Evaluation Plan (MEP) for the Regional Programme Centre 2021–2027 was developed as a strategic document covering the set of evaluations planned under the programme, including the mid-term evaluation.
19. This Final Evaluation Report for Evaluation Theme 2 (ET2) is prepared under the contract “Consultancy Services for the Evaluation of the Regional Programme Centre – Stage I”, during the period May 2025 – January 2026, with the Managing Authority of the Regional Programme Centre as the direct beneficiary. The evaluation forms part of the mid-term evaluation exercise and focuses on the interventions dedicated to digitalisation activities implemented under Priority 2 – “A Digital Region”.
20. The evaluation analyses the contribution of these interventions to the digital transformation of the regional economy and of local public administration, with particular emphasis on the implementation of Specific Objectives SO 1.2 and SO 1.4, in relation to the objectives of the Regional Programme Centre 2021–2027 and to the relevant strategic directions at national and European level.
21. The results will be used by the Managing Authority and RDA Centre to adjust the applicant guidelines, improve project selection and monitoring processes, and inform the priorities for the 2028–2034 programming period. The conclusions and recommendations will contribute to increasing the impact of Priority 2, “A Digital Region,” on the digital transformation process of the Centre Region.
22. In terms of scope, the ET2 evaluation analysed the interventions implemented across the entire Centre Region, namely the counties of Alba, Braşov, Covasna, Harghita, Mureş, and Sibiu, for the period between 5 December 2022, the date of approval of the Regional Programme Centre 2021–2027, and 30 April 2025, the reference date of the evaluation. Although the analysed project portfolio is the one existing at the reference date, the analyses related to all evaluation questions considered both contracted projects and projects under contracting or admitted to technical and financial evaluation, as well as the overall implementation progress of the intervention up to the finalisation of the report.
23. The target group of the evaluation consists of the beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries, namely funding applicants, of the calls for projects under Priority 2 “A Digital Region” — respectively small and medium-sized enterprises, local administrative-territorial units, and local public institutions —

as well as the structures involved in implementation, monitoring, and coordination at the regional and national level.

2.2 Evaluation Questions

24. The analysis was carried out from the perspective of the implementation of the interventions and the institutional mechanisms, focusing on the extent to which Specific Objectives SO 1.2 and SO 1.4 have been achieved. To the extent allowed by the implementation stage, aspects related to the effectiveness of results, the sustainability of digital solutions, and the potential impact of the financed interventions were also addressed.
25. The evaluation process was structured around a set of 11 evaluation questions, formulated in line with the specific objectives of the evaluation and used as a methodological basis for organising the analysis and interpreting the results. The evaluation questions are grouped according to the evaluation criteria relevant to the interventions analysed — relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and horizontal principles — ensuring a coherent and comparable analytical approach. The list of questions was consolidated and, where necessary, adjusted during the evaluation process, following dialogue between the Managing Authority of the Regional Programme Centre, the evaluation team and the members of the Scientific Evaluation Committee (SEC), so that the structure of the analysis would be appropriate to the programme's implementation stage and to the data available.

Table 1. Evaluation Questions

Criterion	Evaluation Question
1 Relevance	EQ1. To what extent do the initial objectives of the intervention still correspond to the needs identified at the local, regional, and EU level?
2 Effectiveness	EQ2. What changes can be observed in relation to the specific objectives of the intervention? EQ3. For whom, in what ways, and under what circumstances does the intervention produce the planned results? EQ4. What are the barriers to implementation, and what measures have been taken to mitigate them? What facilitated the implementation process? EQ5. To what extent has Priority 2 led to the development of digital solutions in the public sector and/or to the digitalisation of SMEs? EQ6. What are the causal mechanisms that produce effects and what are their characteristics? How has the intervention been adapted to subsequent technological or scientific developments in the field of interest?
3 Efficiency	EQ7. To what extent are the costs associated with the interventions under Priority 2 justified by the benefits generated? Are there more efficient alternatives or significant differences between projects in the region or projects financed under other relevant programmes, such as the NRRP and PoCIDIF? What are the causes of these differences? EQ8. To what extent can the interest shown in the launched calls be considered an indicator of efficiency? EQ9. To what extent are the costs of digitalising public services and/or SMEs through Priority 2 justified by the overall benefits?

3 Coherence	EQ10. To what extent do other projects/interventions of the administrative-territorial unit or SME in the field of digitalisation of public services/processes correlate with the project implemented under Priority 2?
3 Horizontal Principles	EQ11. How and to what extent are the requirements regarding the principles of sustainable development, equal opportunities and non-discrimination, and gender equality reflected in the contracted projects?

3. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

3.1 Application of the Evaluation Methodology

26. The application of the evaluation methodology under Evaluation Theme 2 was adapted to the specific nature of the digitalisation interventions and to their stage of implementation, characterised by a limited number of projects effectively under implementation. In this context, the evaluation was primarily oriented towards analysing the implementation framework, the intervention logic, and the conditions required for results to materialise.
27. The evaluation approach combined documentary analysis and available administrative data with the collection of primary information from the actors involved, through a set of tools differentiated according to the type of beneficiary. The methodology included the analysis of the relevant strategic and programmatic framework at European, national, and regional levels, the examination of the project portfolio under Priority 2 "A Digital Region", as well as the application of surveys, semi-structured interviews, workshops dedicated to SME beneficiaries and local public administrations, case studies covering both categories of beneficiaries, and an expert panel with digitalisation consultants. Qualitative methods were used to understand the implementation context, the barriers encountered, and the mechanisms through which the interventions may generate results, while the quantitative component enabled the systematic testing of findings and the identification of recurrent trends across the project portfolio. The interpretation of results was based on the triangulation of data sources, ensuring the robustness of the findings formulated for each evaluation question.
28. The methodological approach was iterative and adaptive, allowing the adjustment of data collection tools and analytical hypotheses during the evaluation process, depending on the progress of implementation and the availability of information. In this context, the evaluation focused on validating the theory of change, on the coherence of the relationship between resources, activities, and intermediate results, as well as on identifying the factors that may influence the performance of the interventions in the next stages. Aspects related to efficiency and impact will be further explored in the next evaluation stage, as project implementation will allow concrete results to be observed.

Table2: Data Collection Methods Applied

Evaluation method	Description	Concrete application
Documentary research	Analysis of the strategic, institutional and operational framework of the Regional Programme Centre and of the	Analysis of programme documents, including the Regional Programme Centre, applicant guidelines, databases on the project portfolio, monitoring reports, funding applications and the Mid-Term

	interventions under Priority 2 “A Digital Region”, to substantiate the evaluation analysis. Analysis of developments in the regional and national socio-economic context, to inform the evaluation.	Review of the Regional Programme Centre, as well as relevant strategic documents, including the Centre Region Development Plan 2021–2027, the Regional Smart Specialisation Strategy, the National Digital Transformation Strategy and the Digital Agenda for Europe. The analysis also covered recent developments in the socio-economic context of the region, including the structure of the economy, level of digitalisation, competitiveness and smart specialisation, using statistical sources and specialised literature. The full list of documents analysed is provided in Annex 1, while the socio-economic analysis is presented in Annex 2.
Interviews with representatives of the Managing Authority of the Regional Programme Centre, beneficiaries, local public administrations and digitalisation consultants	Collection of qualitative perspectives on the implementation process, the relevance of the calls, and the challenges encountered.	Interviews were conducted with representatives of the MA of the Regional Programme Centre, covering evaluation, programming, and monitoring functions, 7 funding applicants, 2 digitalisation consultants and 2 representatives of local public administrations. The full list and related minutes are included in Annex 3.
Workshop with SME beneficiaries	Identification of obstacles and practical solutions related to the implementation of the call for the digitalisation of SMEs, and formulation of recommendations for future calls.	The discussions addressed the main barriers encountered, success factors and proposals for improvement. A synthesis of the results is included in Annex 5.
Workshop with potential beneficiaries from local public administrations	Analysis of the needs, expectations and constraints of local public administrations in relation to digitalisation calls, before contracting.	The workshop involved representatives of local public administrations interested in Priority 2 calls, whose projects were either under preparation or under evaluation. The discussions addressed the clarity of the guidelines, the adequacy of the financing conditions, administrative capacity, system interoperability and the specific challenges related to the digitalisation of public services. The results were used to interpret the potential effectiveness and coherence of the intervention and are summarised in Annex 5.
Workshop with consultants	Analysis of the implementation system of the Regional Programme Centre from the perspective of consultants involved in the preparation and management of projects.	The discussions covered aspects related to administrative procedures, communication with ARD Centre and the simplification of implementation mechanisms. The synthesis is presented in Annex 5.

Expert panel on digitalisation	Validation of preliminary findings and collection of informed opinions on the coherence and sustainability of the financed interventions.	The panel provided an applied perspective on the barriers and solutions for improving project quality. The conclusions are summarised in Annex 6.
Survey applied to funding applicants	Collection of quantitative data on the relevance, attractiveness and clarity of the calls, as well as initial evidence on efficiency and the integration of horizontal principles.	The survey was carried out to collect quantitative data relevant for substantiating the evaluation analyses, in particular for formulating conclusions on the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the interventions financed under Priority 2 "A Digital Region". The instrument used was an online questionnaire, administered through the SurveyMonkey platform and structured according to the analytical dimensions of the evaluation. The questionnaire included 36 items and was designed with a differentiated structure, depending on the stage of the projects: a shorter section addressed to all respondents, focused on perceptions regarding the relevance, clarity and attractiveness of the calls; and an extended section addressed exclusively to beneficiaries with contracted projects, which included all 36 items, including detailed questions on implementation, operational efficiency, difficulties encountered, anticipated benefits and the integration of horizontal principles. In this context, the survey was implemented through two distinct components: the main survey, addressed to beneficiaries with contracted projects under implementation, which included the full set of questions, namely 36 items. At the reference date of the evaluation, 30 April 2025, the universe of this category was N = 20 beneficiaries, respectively N = 38 beneficiaries at the time of the survey launch; and the complementary survey, addressed to all funding applicants who submitted projects under the digitalisation calls, which included a limited set of questions focused on the relevance and clarity of the intervention, N = 339. The survey was carried out between August 2025 and January 2026. By the end of the data collection period, 92 valid responses had been obtained, of which 40 were from beneficiaries with contracted projects, corresponding to the main survey of the evaluation. In relation to the universe of contracted beneficiaries at the evaluation reference date, this result ensures full coverage of the population relevant for analysing the implementation, efficiency and performance of the interventions, namely N = 20 beneficiaries as of 30 April 2025. Even when compared with the extended universe existing at the time of the survey launch, N = 38, the response rate covers the full universe of beneficiaries, corresponding to an approximate margin of error of $\pm 3\%$ at a 100% confidence level,

		thus providing a high degree of robustness for the conclusions related to the analysis of the effectiveness and efficiency of the interventions. The complementary component of the survey, related to the total universe of applicants, N = 339, corresponds to a response rate of approximately 28%, namely 96 responses, which represents an adequate level for descriptive and comparative analyses concerning the relevance criterion, given the general and limited nature of the questions and its role in supporting the interpretation of the results of the main survey. The analysis of responses was based on descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies, percentage distributions and measures of central tendency, namely mean, median and mode, in order to identify the main trends, convergences and differences relevant for evaluating the interventions under Priority 2. The survey results are presented in Annex 4.
Case studies	In-depth analysis of the implementation process and lessons learned at micro level.	Eleven case studies were carried out with beneficiaries of Action 2.2 – Digitalisation of SMEs. Initially, 10 case studies had been planned, covering 7 SMEs and 4 local public administrations. The case studies are presented in Annex 7.

3.2 Limitations and Challenges

29. The analysis of the effectiveness of the interventions under Priority 2 “A Digital Region” was carried out in a context in which most projects were in early stages of implementation, namely Action 2.2 targeting SMEs, while for some actions, there were no contracted projects yet, such as Action 2.1.1 targeting local public administrations. In this context, the evaluation focused on the intervention logic, the potential for effectiveness, and the factors that may influence future performance, since the available indicators mainly reflect planned targets rather than results already materialised. The indicators available at the time of the evaluation, therefore primarily reflect planned targets, not reported results.
30. From the perspective of quantitative data collection, the main evaluation survey, applied to beneficiaries under implementation, generated 40 valid responses, corresponding to the entire universe of contracted projects at the time of the survey launch, in August 2025. For this main evaluation sample, the data collected ensures a margin of error of approximately $\pm 3\%$, which is essential given that the questionnaire included an extended section with all 36 items, addressed exclusively to contracted beneficiaries and dedicated to the analysis of the efficiency, effectiveness, and coherence of the interventions, as well as the integration of horizontal principles. Under these conditions, the main survey provides a solid methodological basis for interpreting the findings on the implementation and performance of the interventions financed under Priority 2. In the case of local public administrations, the response rate was lower, mainly as a result of limited administrative capacity and the long duration of the evaluation and contracting process. Consequently, the findings related to local public administrations are

predominantly prospective and perception-based, being substantiated through the triangulation of information from surveys, interviews, and case studies.

4. CONTEXT

31. Priority 2 “A Digital Region” under the Regional Programme Centre 2021–2027 aims to support the digital transformation of the regional economy and local public administration, in a context characterised by uneven levels of digitalisation, variable administrative capacity and significant gaps between urban and rural areas. The priority has a total allocation of EUR 80,931,720, representing approximately 5.85% of the programme’s total budget, and targets both SMEs and administrative-territorial units in the Centre Region.
32. Priority 2 is aligned with the main European, national and regional strategic frameworks relevant to digital transformation, namely:
 - Policy Objective 1 (PO1) – A Smarter Europe, as defined by Regulation (EU) No 1060/2021;
 - the European Union Digital Agenda 2030 and the Digital Compass for Europe;
 - the National Strategy on Romania’s Digital Agenda 2030 and the National Competitiveness Strategy 2021–2027;
 - the Smart Specialisation Strategy of the Centre Region (RIS3 Centre).
33. Through these strategic alignments, the interventions contribute to achieving the objectives related to digital transformation, territorial cohesion, and the transition towards a knowledge-based economy.
34. The interventions under Priority 2 are structured around two complementary Specific Objectives:
 - SO 1.2 Capitalising on the benefits of digitalisation;
 - SO 1.4 Developing skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship.
35. The priority aims both to support the digitalisation of SMEs, through the adoption of digital technologies and the modernisation of business processes, and to support the digitalisation of local public services, through e-government, smart city, and public data management solutions. The interventions are user-centred and focused on interoperability. The priority also provides for the development of a regional pilot open innovation platform in the field of Smart City, as a strategic regional project, although the related call had not been launched at the time of the evaluation.
36. The component related to the development of digital skills (SO 1.4) plays a support role in relation to the digitalisation interventions financed under Priority 2, aiming to strengthen beneficiaries’ capacity to use the digital solutions implemented.
37. The interventions target the entire Centre Region, covering both urban and rural areas, depending on the specific needs of beneficiaries and their capacity to implement digital solutions.
Theory of Change of the Interventions under Priority 2 “A Digital Region”
38. The theory of change for Priority 2 “A Digital Region” describes how investments in digital solutions and skills development contribute to the structural transformation of the regional economy and public administration in the Centre Region. It is based on a logical causal chain that starts from digitalisation needs, continues with the activities financed through the programme and leads to intermediate results and anticipated impact, highlighting the complementarity between SO 1.2 and SO 1.4.

39. Priority 2 pursues an integrated digital transformation, combining the modernisation of public services and business processes with the development of the human capital needed for the sustainable use of digital technologies. Through this dual approach, the intervention aims to strengthen a coherent regional digital ecosystem, based on interoperability, innovation and skills, capable of supporting economic competitiveness and administrative efficiency in the long term.

SO 1.2 – Capitalising on the Benefits of Digitalisation

40. The theory of change for SO 1.2 is based on the assumption that the digitalisation of public services and business processes leads to more efficient and transparent administration, more accessible public services and a more competitive regional economy. The interventions address structural constraints such as the lack of interoperability of IT systems, limited access to quality digital services, the reduced capacity of SMEs to adopt digital technologies, and persistent gaps between urban and rural areas.
41. Through investments in e-government solutions, smart city platforms, data management and advanced digital technologies for SMEs, such as automation, cloud, IoT, AI, and VR/AR, the programme aims to achieve results such as integrated and citizen-centred public services, the modernisation of business processes, and increased productivity of SMEs, with cumulative effects on regional competitiveness.

SO 1.4 – Digital Skills for Industrial Transition

42. SO 1.4 complements the interventions under SO 1.2 through a support-oriented logic, focused on developing the digital skills of the workforce, especially among employees of beneficiary SMEs. The underlying assumption is that investments in technology generate sustainable effects only if they are accompanied by professional training adapted to the digital solutions implemented.
43. The interventions target specific training for the use of digital equipment and applications, ERP and IoT systems, cybersecurity, data management, and e-commerce. The expected results include reducing digital skills gaps, increasing the efficiency of investments made under SO 1.2, and strengthening SMEs' capacity for innovation and adaptation to industrial transition.
44. Through the complementarity between SO 1.2 and SO 1.4, Priority 2 "A Digital Region" aims to ensure both the digitalisation of infrastructure and services and the development of the skills needed for their effective use, creating the premises for a sustainable digital transition, with positive effects on economic competitiveness, administrative efficiency, and the quality of life of citizens in the Centre Region. The intervention logic is illustrated schematically in Figure 1 (SO 1.2) and Figure 2 (SO 1.4).

Figure 1: Intervention logic of SO 1.2 – Capitalising on the benefits of digitalisation for citizens, companies, research organisations and public authorities

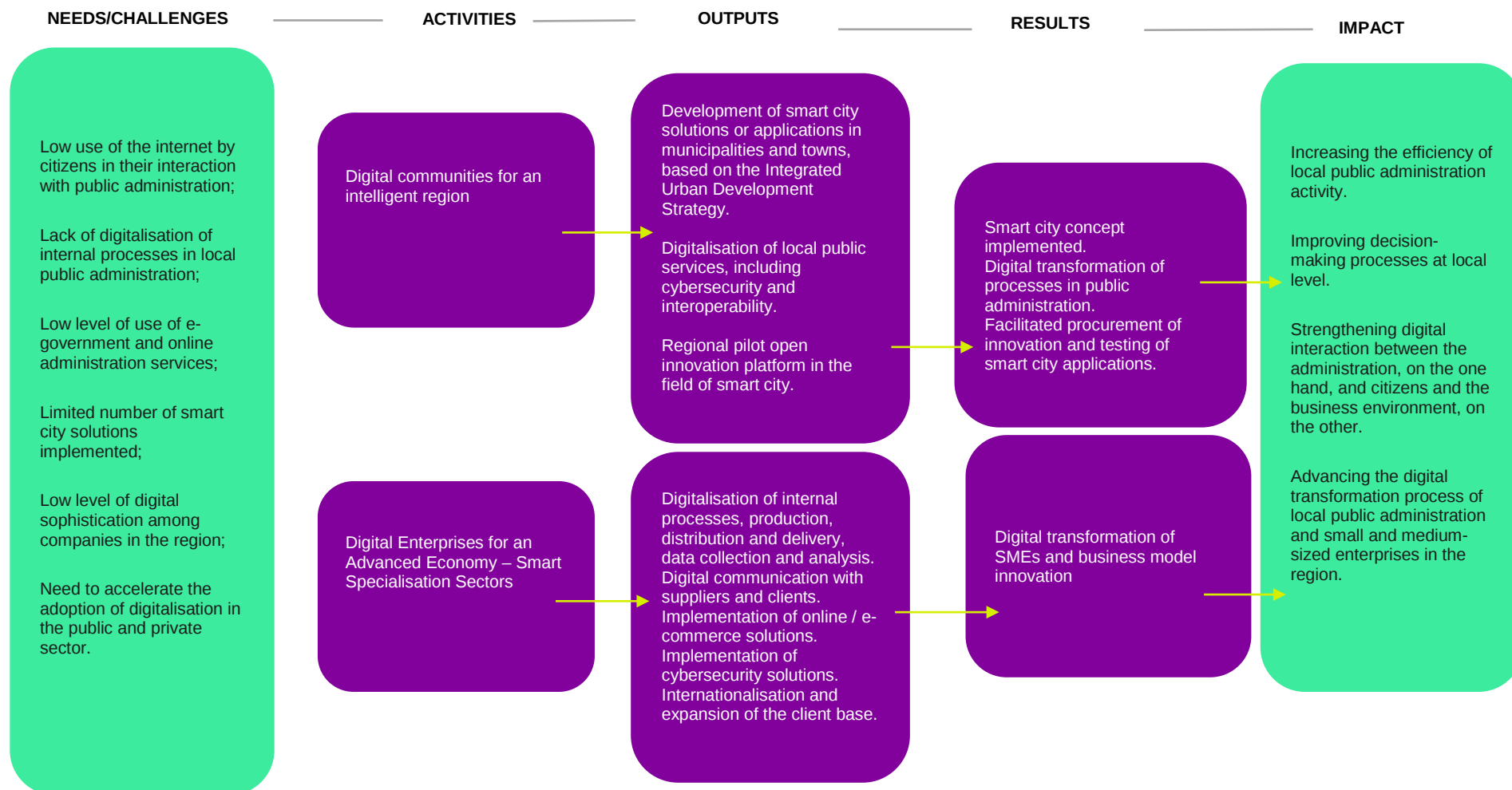
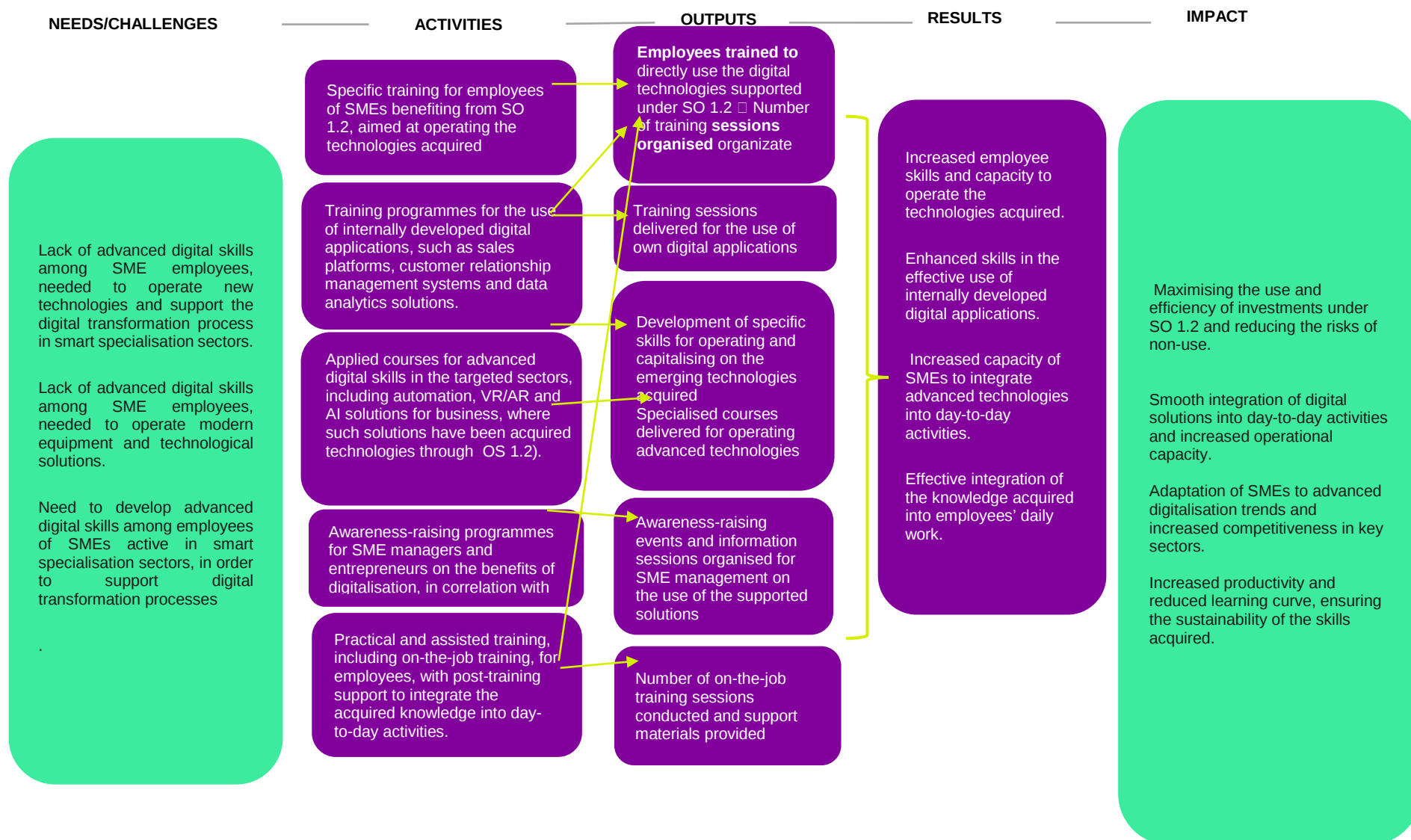


Figure 2: Intervention logic of SO 1.4 – Developing skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship (ERDF)



45. By January 2026, two calls for projects had been launched under Priority 2 – “A Digital Region”, with different levels of implementation maturity. The call dedicated exclusively to SO 1.2 – Capitalising on the benefits of digitalisation (“Digital Communities for a Smart Region – Digital Solutions”) is currently in the technical and financial evaluation stage, with no projects contracted to date. In parallel, the integrated call covering SO 1.2 and SO 1.4 (“Digital Enterprises for an Advanced Economy – Smart Specialisation Sectors”) has recorded significant progress, with 70 contracted projects at different stages of implementation.
46. In terms of results, the contracted interventions mainly support the digitalisation of business processes among SMEs, with direct effects on regional competitiveness and their integration into European value chains. Complementarily, the interventions aim to improve citizens’ access to digital public services through the development of more efficient and accessible electronic applications and platforms, as well as to promote smart city solutions that contribute to optimising urban mobility, public safety, energy efficiency, and civic participation.
47. A cross-cutting result of the interventions is the strengthening of the digital skills of SME employees, through training activities correlated with the technologies implemented and the processes modernised, which is essential for the sustainability of the investments made.
48. In the long term, these interventions as a whole are expected to contribute to reducing the digital divide at the regional level, increasing the resilience of the local economy and consolidating a modern, efficient, and citizen-oriented public administration, in line with the strategic objectives of the programme.

5. EVALUATION FINDINGS

5.1. EVALUATION CRITERION „RELEVANCE.”

✓ EQ1. To what extent do the initial objectives of the intervention still correspond to the needs identified at the local, regional, and EU levels?

Role of Evaluation Question EQ1

49. The evaluation question analyses the continued relevance of the objectives of Priority 2 “A Digital Region”, in relation to the socio-economic, technological, and institutional developments recorded during the period 2021–2025. The evaluation seeks to determine whether the intervention design established at the programming stage remains adequate to the current needs of beneficiaries, namely SMEs and local public administrations, and coherent with the strategic directions regarding the digital transition.

Analytical Approach

50. The relevance analysis was carried out in accordance with the methodology described in the dedicated chapter and was structured around three complementary analytical dimensions, namely:
- the dynamics of the regional socio-economic and digital context, analysed through key indicators such as GDP per capita, the structure of SMEs, digital skills and participation in lifelong learning, using sources such as Eurostat, DESI, and the EIB;

- the degree of coherence between the objectives of the intervention and the current needs of beneficiaries, assessed through the triangulation of survey results, interviews, case studies and documentary analysis;
- the strategic targeting of funding, analysed from the perspective of the alignment of calls for projects with the emerging priorities of digital transformation, including interoperability, user-oriented digital services and emerging technologies, in correlation with RIS3 Centre and the Digital Compass 2030.

Dynamics of the Regional Socio-Economic and Digital Context

51. The socio-economic analysis presented in Annex 2 confirms that the objectives of Priority 2 remain relevant in a regional context characterised by sustained economic growth, but uneven digital maturity. Between 2018 and 2024, the Centre Region recorded a significant increase in GDP per capita (+48%) and in the number of active SMEs (+24%), without these developments being accompanied by a similar pace of digitalisation. The imbalances are more pronounced between the Braşov–Sibiu–Mureş growth poles and the peripheral areas of Harghita–Covasna.
52. The main structural challenges identified are:
- a low level of digitalisation among SMEs and in public administration;
 - a shortage of digital skills among the workforce;
 - low interoperability between public IT systems;
 - development gaps between urban and rural areas.

Coherence of the Intervention with Beneficiaries' Needs

53. Statistical data and sectoral analyses, including Eurostat, DESI and EIB sources, confirm the persistence of the needs identified at the programming stage: only 34.8% of employees use the internet for professional purposes, while only 33% of adults have basic digital skills, both values being significantly below the EU average. In the case of SMEs, the use of advanced digital technologies remains limited and concentrated in the region's economic centres.
54. These findings are confirmed by the case study analysis, which highlights different levels of digital maturity and varied typologies of implemented solutions, ranging from basic digitalisation, such as ERP and IT infrastructure, to advanced technologies, including 3D/VR, IoT, automation, and integrated platforms. In all cases, the interventions responded to concrete needs identified through digital maturity audits and digitalisation plans.
- An enterprise in the field of architecture and creative design — the maturity audit indicated an average level of digitalisation and the absence of specialised IT staff; the investment targeted 3D and VR technologies, high-performance equipment, and staff training, in line with the “IT & creative industries” field and the objectives related to Industrial Transition.
 - An automotive services company — the starting point was predominantly manual internal processes and the absence of a centralised database; the project introduced interconnected web platforms and a mobile application for workflow integration and employee training.
 - An enterprise in the media and digital education sector — based on the DIH audit, it carried out a digital pivot combining ERP/CRM/e-invoicing with 3D and IoT technologies, while also developing educational digital content accessible to the public.

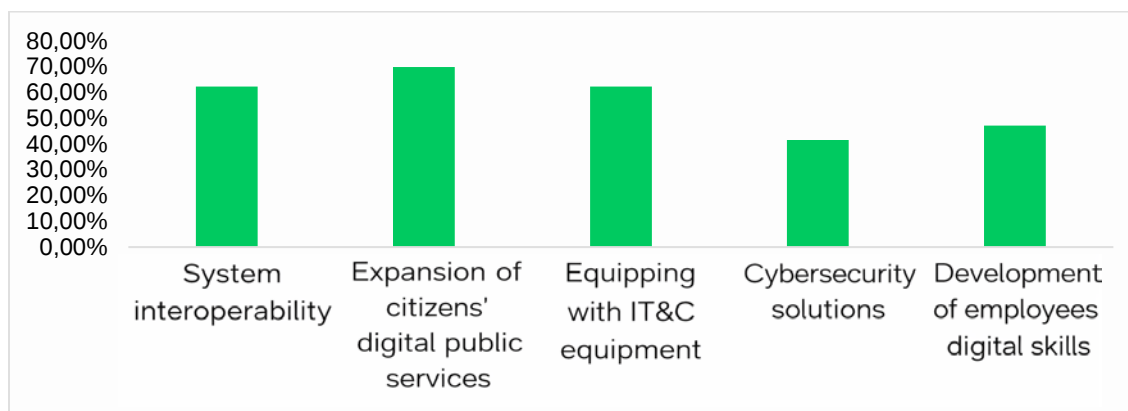
- An industrial maintenance service provider — invested in equipment fitted with sensors and real-time monitoring applications, reducing response times and improving operational control.
- A production and logistics company — implemented an ERP system and new hardware infrastructure to integrate production flows, manage stocks and enable real-time managerial reporting.
- A production and tourism company from Covasna — integrated production flows through an ERP system and upgraded hardware infrastructure, ensuring traceability and real-time managerial reporting.

55. Thus, the positive economic dynamics of the Centre Region have not been accompanied by a proportional pace of digital transformation. The current context confirms the continued need for and relevance of the interventions under Priority 2 “A Digital Region”, aimed at reducing territorial disparities, supporting innovation, and accelerating the technological integration of the regional economy.

Beneficiaries' Perception and the strategic targeting of funding

56. The results of the complementary survey addressed to all funding applicants indicate a very high perception of the relevance of the calls under Priority 2 “A Digital Region”. Out of the total number of respondents to this question (N = 96, from a universe of 339 invited applicants), approximately 90% consider the calls to be very relevant (44.79%) or relevant (44.79%) in relation to the real digitalisation needs of their organisations. A small percentage of respondents consider the calls only partially relevant (8.3%), while negative perceptions are marginal, below 3%.
57. These results show that the objectives of the intervention are perceived as being well aligned with current digitalisation needs, both in the business environment and in local public administration. The qualitative analyses, including interviews and case studies, additionally indicate expectations regarding the updating of applicant guidelines to more clearly reflect emerging trends such as interoperability, the use of artificial intelligence and the orientation of digital services towards users.

Figure 3. Development needs of the region (LPA)



Source: Authors' processing beneficiaries survey

58. Both SMEs and local public administrations emphasise, in the interviews and case studies, the importance of funding for the development of digital skills and for the transition from digitalisation

centred on isolated acquisitions towards integrated digital solutions that are effectively used in day-to-day activities. The qualitative findings indicate that the interventions under Priority 2 mainly supported the implementation and use of digital solutions, with the purchase of equipment playing a limited and strictly complementary role.

Correlation with Regional and European Strategic Documents

59. The objectives of Priority 2 “A Digital Region” are aligned with the European, national and regional strategic framework, reflecting the continuity of the directions established through the Digital Compass 2030, RIS3 Centre 2021–2027 and the Regional Programme Centre 2021–2027.
60. RIS3 Centre defines digitalisation as a cross-cutting condition for competitiveness, with an emphasis on digital skills, interoperability and innovation, both in administration and in the private sector. The Regional Programme Centre operationalises these directions through the objectives and actions of Priority 2, aiming to accelerate digitalisation in the public and private sectors and to develop digital skills as a complementary element to technology investments.
61. At European level, the Digital Compass 2030 sets targets for increasing the share of digitalised SMEs and of the population with basic digital skills, to which the interventions under Priority 2 contribute directly. This alignment is also confirmed by the Mid-Term Review (MTR) Report of the Regional Programme Centre, March 2025.
62. The two calls under Priority 2 support the digitalisation of public services and the interoperability of local platforms, promoting emerging technologies such as AI, IoT and cloud, while Action 2.2 supports the digital transformation of SMEs through investments in software, automated processes and the development of digital skills, conditional upon the existence of a Digitalisation Plan. This structure contributes to the strategic targeting of funding towards areas of high relevance for the region's digital transition.
63. At implementation level, the case study analysis presented in Annex 7 shows how the objectives of Priority 2 are translated into concrete investments, adapted to the needs and level of digital maturity of beneficiaries. The projects analysed target the digitalisation of internal processes, the integration of operational workflows, the adoption of advanced digital solutions, such as 3D/VR technologies, interconnected platforms, monitoring systems and digital applications, as well as the development of staff skills. These interventions reflect the practical application of RIS3 principles and of the objectives of industrial transition and confirm the relevance of the requirement concerning the existence of a digitalisation plan and of the mandatory human resources training component.

Recent dynamics of digitalisation in Local Public Administrations and the business environment

64. In addition to the socio-economic and statistical analysis, the data collected through the survey, interviews and workshops indicate that the digitalisation process in the Centre Region has entered a consolidation stage. The needs identified at the programming stage remain relevant, but beneficiaries now express them more clearly and concretely, through requirements oriented towards the effective use of the financed software solutions. The emphasis is placed on their integration into internal processes, interoperability with other systems, and the improvement of services and workflows.

- 65. In both the public sector and the business environment, a transition can be observed from the isolated use of software solutions towards integrated digital solutions that enable data exchange between systems and improve the quality of services provided to users.
- 66. In the case of local public administrations, the qualitative evidence confirms an increasing demand for digital services accessible to citizens, correlated with the need for institutional interoperability and the strengthening of staff digital skills.
- 67. In the business environment, digitalisation is perceived as an essential factor of competitiveness, with growing interest in integrated solutions and emerging technologies, despite persistent constraints related to costs and the availability of specialised human resources.

Main Findings Related to EQ1

- 68. The initial objectives of Priority 2, “A Digital Region” remain relevant and well aligned with the current needs of the Centre Region. The intervention logic is coherent with the socio-economic and technological developments recorded during the period 2021–2025 and responds to persistent structural challenges, such as the low level of digitalisation among SMEs and local public administrations, the shortage of digital skills, limited interoperability and uneven digital maturity across counties.
- 69. Most beneficiaries perceive the interventions as relevant or highly relevant, confirming the adequacy of the intervention design in relation to current digitalisation needs in the business environment and local public administration.
- 70. The intervention is coherently aligned with the relevant European, national and regional strategies. Maintaining its relevance concerns ensuring flexibility in implementation so as to allow the inclusion and financing of existing software solutions, including in the form of subscriptions, as well as the equivalence of initially proposed digital solutions when these are no longer available, while respecting the same functionalities, results, and eligible cost levels.
- 71. In conclusion, the objectives of Priority 2 “A Digital Region” remain relevant and up to date, while the current intervention framework supports the maintenance of relevance in the medium and long term through its orientation towards integrated, interoperable, and user-oriented software solutions.
- 72. Beneficiaries’ feedback indicates that the main challenges arise during the implementation stage, especially in situations where some software solutions initially proposed are no longer available or optimal. In this context, the importance of applying mechanisms for the equivalence of digital solutions is underlined, through the existing procedures, namely notifications or addenda, while respecting the functionalities, expected results, and eligible costs.

5.2. EVALUATION CRITERION „EFFECTIVENESS.”

✓ EQ2. What changes can be observed in relation to the specific objectives of the intervention?

Role of Evaluation Question EQ2

- 73. Evaluation Question EQ2 analyses the effectiveness of the interventions under Priority 2 “A Digital Region”, namely the extent to which they have started to generate, or have the potential to generate, observable changes in relation to Specific Objectives RSO 1.2 and RSO 1.4. The analysis focuses on the direction and intensity of changes at beneficiary level, namely SMEs and local public administrations, by reference to the achievements recorded, the operational changes

observed, and the effects anticipated in the short and medium term, depending on the stage of implementation.

Analytical Approach

74. The evaluation was structured around three main analytical dimensions, namely:
- the statistical dynamics of regional digitalisation needs, analysed through the evolution of socio-economic and digital indicators, such as GDP per capita, unemployment rate, adult participation in training and use of advanced digital technologies, in order to assess the extent to which the interventions are situated within a changing regional context;
 - progress in output and result indicators, examining the extent to which the interventions have started to generate results in relation to Specific Objectives RSO 1.2 and RSO 1.4, through the analysis of programme indicators (RCO/RCR) and achievements reported by beneficiaries, depending on the stage of implementation;
 - beneficiaries' perceptions of observed changes and expected effects, analysed on the basis of surveys, interviews, case studies and workshops.
75. The analysis combined quantitative sources, including statistical indicators, monitoring data and the survey applied to funding applicants, with qualitative sources, including interviews, case studies, socio-economic and documentary analysis, an expert panel with digitalisation consultants, and a workshop. This provided an overview of the changes already observable at the level of contracted projects, as well as of the anticipated direction of transformation for the interventions under Priority 2, in the context of an ongoing implementation process.

Statistical Dynamics of Regional Digitalisation Needs

76. The socio-economic analysis presented in Annex 2 shows that the Centre Region recorded positive economic development during the period 2018–2023, with GDP per capita increasing by 48% and entrepreneurial density rising, while digital progress remained slower. Structural gaps relevant to the effectiveness of the interventions under RSO 1.2 and RSO 1.4 persist: low use of digital tools in professional activity, at 34.8% of employees, a low share of SMEs using advanced digital technologies, at 38%, and participation in training below the EU average, despite recent positive developments.
77. Thus, the interventions under Priority 2 operate in a context in which structural needs persist, and changes are rather the result of ongoing processes than of consolidated digital maturity at regional level.

Analysis of Intermediate Results at Priority 2 Level

78. The analysis of effectiveness reflects the context of ongoing implementation. At the evaluation reference date, 30 April 2025, there were 20 contracted projects under Action 2.2 – Digitalisation of SMEs, a number that increased progressively during the evaluation period, reaching 70 signed contracts by the time the report was finalised, in January 2026. This evolution corresponds to an achievement level of approximately 36% of the target for indicator RCO01, “Enterprises supported”, with a 2029 target of 195.
79. For Action 2.1.1 – Digital Communities, targeting local public administrations, there were no contracted projects yet at the time of the evaluation.

Perceptions and evidence regarding observable and anticipated changes – SMEs

80. In the case of SMEs, the changes associated with the interventions under Priority 2 “A Digital Region” are already observable at the operational level. The results of the main survey, applied to SME beneficiaries with contracted projects, indicate a clear convergence between the objectives of SO 1.2 and the real needs of the business environment, with projects being perceived as relevant instruments for modernising internal processes and adapting to current technological requirements.
81. According to the survey presented in Annex 4, most respondents anticipate increased operational efficiency, cost reductions through automation, strengthened cybersecurity and improved customer relations. These expectations indicate a clear orientation towards integrated digital solutions that are effectively used in day-to-day activities, rather than towards isolated purchases of IT equipment.
82. These results are confirmed and detailed through interviews, workshops and the analysed case studies presented in Annex 7, which highlight concrete changes in SME practices: optimisation of internal processes through integrated solutions, such as ERP and interconnected digital platforms, faster access to real-time data, reduced operational response times and improved decision-making. The case studies consistently emphasise the role of developing staff digital skills as an essential factor for the effective use of the implemented solutions.
83. Overall, the interventions under Priority 2 support SMEs in a transition from operational digitalisation towards digital transformation with strategic value, where technology is integrated into the organisation's day-to-day functioning. This evolution is coherent with the objectives of RSO 1.2 and RSO 1.4, and the intensity of changes is already visible at the micro level in the projects analysed.

Expected Changes at the Level of Local Public Administrations

84. In the case of local public administrations, the changes are mainly anticipated, as at the time of the evaluation, the call under Action 2.1.1 was in the technical and financial evaluation stage. Nevertheless, the results of the complementary survey addressed to local public administrations and the interviews indicate that the support provided is perceived as a strategic opportunity to modernise local administration, with an emphasis on interoperability, internal efficiency, transparency and citizen-centred public services.
85. In addition, the case studies analysed at the level of local public administrations, including small and medium-sized municipalities, show that the interventions are perceived as a catalyst for organisational transformation, not merely as isolated IT investments.
86. Local public administrations anticipate a transition from an administrative model centred on front-office counters and paper documents towards one based on integrated digital processes, with a direct impact on administrative capacity. The case studies highlight the central role of digitalising internal workflows, including registry services, document flows and electronic signatures, as a foundation for developing citizen-oriented digital services, as well as the potential to reduce pressure on small administrative teams, especially in rural administrative-territorial units. At the same time, differences in digital maturity and local leadership explain the variation in the intensity of anticipated changes, supporting the need for a phased and differentiated approach under Priority 2.

Main Findings Related to EQ2

87. The interventions under Priority 2 show a high level of effectiveness currently materialising. The financed projects are coherent with the intervention logic and target tangible results, such as increased operational efficiency, cost reduction, improved data traceability and the development of digital skills.
88. Implementation progress is moderate, but the direction of implementation is appropriate to the current stage of the programme. At the time of the evaluation, approximately 36% of the target for indicator RCO01, “Enterprises supported”, had been achieved, while for indicator RCO13, “Value of digital services, products and processes developed for enterprises”, the achievement level was around 2% of the value estimated for 2029, in line with the dynamics specific to the early stages of implementation.
89. In the case of SMEs, the effects of the intervention are already observable at micro level. The case studies highlight improvements in internal processes, customer relations and data security, confirming that the interventions generate real operational changes, coherent with the objectives of RSO 1.2 and RSO 1.4.
90. In the case of local public administrations, effectiveness is mainly anticipated, given the pre-contracting stage of the dedicated call. Nevertheless, the interventions clearly respond to the identified needs for interoperability, internal efficiency and transparency, and show significant potential impact on the quality of public services and the administration–citizen relationship.
91. The qualitative analysis highlights significant differences in digital maturity between beneficiary typologies, both in the business environment and at the level of local public administrations. Municipalities and larger towns, as well as SMEs located in the region’s economic centres, have advanced towards integrated digital solutions and more complex technologies, oriented towards interoperability and process optimisation. By contrast, small administrative-territorial units and rural localities, together with some smaller SMEs, are still at a basic digitalisation stage, focused on digitalising essential internal workflows. This diversity confirms the need for a differentiated and phased approach to the support provided under Priority 2.
92. Overall, the final effectiveness of the interventions will depend on the beneficiaries’ capacity to sustainably integrate digital solutions into their day-to-day processes and on their progress towards organisational transformation based on skills, interoperability and adaptability. Changes are already visible in the case of SMEs and credibly anticipated in the case of local public administrations, indicating solid premises for medium-term impact.

✓ **EQ3. For whom, in what ways, and under what circumstances does the intervention produce the planned results?**

Role of Evaluation Question EQ3

92. Evaluation Question EQ3 seeks to explain how and under what conditions the interventions under Priority 2 produce results, and for which types of beneficiaries these results are more likely to occur or to be more intense. In the context of ongoing implementation and in the absence of aggregated final results at programme level, the analysis is predominantly prospective and focuses on the causal mechanisms of the intervention, the profile of beneficiaries and the contextual factors — institutional, territorial and organisational — that facilitate or limit the intensity and pace of change.

Analytical Approach

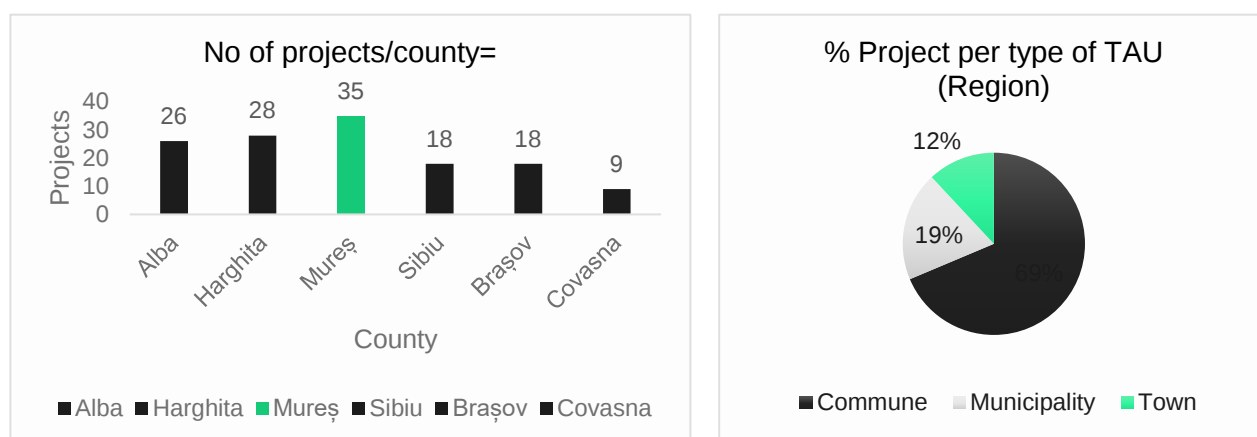
93. The evaluation was structured around three main analytical dimensions, defined in the evaluation matrix and operationalised through a mix of quantitative and qualitative data:
- the profile of beneficiaries and their level of digital maturity, in order to analyse for whom the intervention works more effectively;
 - the mode of implementation and the scale of the intervention, in order to understand how financial resources, internal capacity and partnerships influence results;
 - the territorial and institutional context, in order to identify the circumstances in which the intervention generates credible and sustainable results.
94. The analysis is based on data from the portfolio of projects submitted and contracted under Actions 2.1.1 and 2.2, on the results of the main survey applied to SMEs with contracted projects at the time of data collection (N = 40 respondents), as well as on interviews and thematic workshops with beneficiaries, consultants and RDA Centre, and on the case studies carried out for SMEs and local public administrations.

For whom the Intervention Works: Beneficiary Profile

Local Public Administration Beneficiaries – Action 2.1.1 “Digital Communities”

95. The analysis of submitted projects highlights a predominantly rural profile of beneficiaries, with communes accounting for 69%, confirming the orientation of the intervention towards local administrations with acute digitalisation needs and a low level of digital maturity. However, municipalities and towns (31%) propose higher-value projects, oriented towards integrated and interoperable solutions, reflecting more advanced administrative and digital capacity.

Figure 4: Distribution of projects submitted under Call 2.1.1 by county and type of administrative-territorial unit



Source: Evaluation team processing

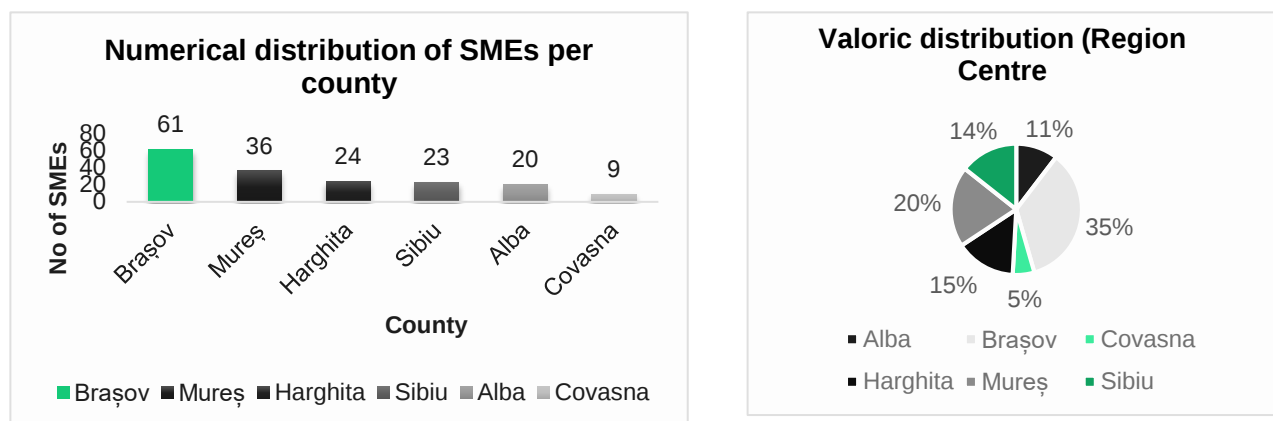
96. The territorial distribution is balanced across counties, with a higher concentration in Mureș, Harghita, and Alba, suggesting the existence of more active local administrative ecosystems, but also significant differences in institutional capacity between different types of administrative-territorial units.

97. Evidence from the case studies carried out at the level of local public administrations, presented in Annex 7, confirms and nuances the profile resulting from the analysis of the project portfolio and the survey. The case studies show that, especially in the case of communes and small towns, the initial level of digital maturity is low, characterised by fragmented administrative processes, the predominant use of paper-based documents and a high dependence on isolated, non-interoperable applications. In these contexts, digitalisation is perceived primarily as a tool for internal efficiency and for reducing operational pressure on small administrative teams, rather than as an approach focused exclusively on advanced digital services for citizens.

SME Beneficiaries – Action 2.2 “Digitalisation of SMEs”

98. The analysis of the 204 submitted projects indicates a clear concentration in the regional economic poles, namely Brașov, Mureș and Sibiu, both in terms of the number of projects and the requested amount, confirming the correlation between entrepreneurial density, digital maturity, and the capacity to formulate competitive projects. SMEs in Brașov and Sibiu counties mainly propose integrated digitalisation projects, such as ERP, CRM and automation, while in Harghita, Alba and Covasna counties operational digitalisation and skills development projects predominate, highlighting different levels of digital maturity.

Figure 5: Distribution of projects submitted under Call 2.2 for SMEs



Source: Evaluation Team processing

99. The results of the main survey applied to private beneficiaries with contracted projects confirm that the interventions predominantly attracted SMEs at the beginning of their digital transformation process. At the time of the survey launch, in August 2025, there were 38 contracted projects, of which 40 beneficiaries responded, corresponding to a 100% response rate. Among SME respondents, more than half, 57.5%, stated that they had no previous experience in digitalisation, while 30% had only limited experience, consisting of one or two minor initiatives. Only 12.5% of respondents indicated an average level of experience, and no respondent reported solid experience in digitalisation before the project. These data indicate a predominantly low initial level of digital maturity.
100. Evidence from the case studies confirms and explains this initial profile, showing that most SMEs started from a low or medium level of digitalisation, without dedicated IT resources and with fragmented systems. In this context, investments mainly targeted the integration of IT systems,

the automation of operational processes and the development of staff digital skills. These findings indicate that the interventions under Priority 2 act as a catalyst for digital transformation, not merely as incremental support.

How results are produced and the favourable circumstances

101. The results of the intervention are produced mainly through mechanisms of operational transformation, activated especially in SMEs that combine technology investments with the reorganisation of internal processes and the development of digital skills. According to the main survey and qualitative evidence, digitalisation generates faster effects where the implemented solutions, such as ERP/CRM systems, automation and digital platforms, are integrated into current workflows and supported by employee training and the active involvement of management.
102. The case studies confirm the existence of recurrent causal mechanisms through which the intervention generates results: data integration and traceability ensured through ERP/CRM/BI systems; automation of internal processes and reduction of operational errors; development of digital interfaces for relations with clients and suppliers; and the use of specialised digital technologies to optimise production and services. These mechanisms explain the observable improvements in operational efficiency, response speed and the quality of managerial decision-making.
103. The favourable circumstances for achieving results include the existence of minimum internal capacity, in terms of both human and organisational resources, effective and well-structured cooperation with competent IT providers, and the clarity of the digitalisation plan from the project design stage. Conversely, constraints such as digital skills shortages, technical integration difficulties, supplier costs and administrative delays may slow down the pace of transformation, especially in the case of micro-enterprises and beneficiaries located in peripheral areas.
104. The analysis indicates differentiated results depending on the initial level of digital maturity and the territorial context. SMEs located in regional economic poles integrate advanced solutions more rapidly and obtain more consistent competitive benefits, while SMEs in less developed areas record gradual effects, dependent on additional support for training and the consolidation of internal capacity.
105. In the case of local public administrations, the results are predominantly anticipated, with higher potential in municipalities and medium-sized towns, where institutional capacity and pre-existing interoperability can accelerate the production of effects. The workshops and case studies show that projects with higher effectiveness potential are those built on a clear sequencing of interventions: digitalising internal workflows, including registry services, document flows, archiving and electronic signatures, as a precondition for developing citizen-oriented digital public services.
106. In these contexts, the focus shifts towards interoperability, system integration and the expansion of online services, indicating a higher intensity of the anticipated transformation. The differences observed between local public administrations confirm the determining role of administrative capacity, local leadership and internal digital skills in generating results.

Main Findings Related to EQ3

107. The interventions under Priority 2 “A Digital Region” show high potential effectiveness, with results already observable especially in the case of SMEs with a low or medium level of digital maturity.

In these cases, the financed projects have generated concrete operational and technological improvements, confirming the functioning of the change mechanisms assumed in the intervention logic.

108. The favourable circumstances for achieving results include the existence of minimum internal capacity, in terms of human and organisational resources, functional partnerships with competent IT providers, the active involvement of management and the technical support provided by RDA Centre. By contrast, the constraints identified relate to bureaucracy, limited human resources and digital skills gaps, which are more pronounced in peripheral counties and rural areas and influence the pace and intensity of results.
109. The analysis confirms a positive correlation between the size of the grant and the organisational maturity of beneficiaries. More developed enterprises propose and implement complex projects, such as ERP, CRM, advanced automation solutions or AI, while micro-enterprises focus mainly on basic digitalisation investments, with gradual effects and a slower transformation dynamic.
110. The theory of change remains validated: the intervention produces more visible results where human capital, skills, and local digital ecosystems are sufficiently developed and actively used. The effectiveness of the intervention is supported by the complementarity between SO 1.2 and SO 1.4, which ensures the correlation between investments in digital solutions and the development of the skills needed to use them.

✓ **EQ4. What are the barriers to implementation, and what measures have been taken to mitigate them? What facilitated the implementation process?**

Role of Evaluation Question EQ4

111. Evaluation Question EQ4 analyses the internal and external barriers that influenced the implementation of the interventions under Priority 2 “A Digital Region”, as well as the measures adopted to mitigate them and the factors that facilitated project implementation. The analysis examines the extent to which these constraints affected the pace, coherence, and effectiveness of implementation, and what lessons can be drawn for optimising the next stages of the programme.

Analytical Approach

112. The evaluation was based on the results of the main survey applied to SMEs with contracted projects at the time of data collection (N = 40), as well as on the results of the complementary survey applied to all funding applicants, namely local public administrations and SMEs, the interviews conducted with digitalisation consultants, and the qualitative evidence from the case studies. These sources enabled a detailed analysis of how administrative, technical and contextual barriers concretely influenced project implementation.
113. The analysis was structured around three levels:
 - internal barriers, namely administrative, organisational, and technical barriers;
 - external barriers, namely economic, market-related, and contextual factors;
 - mitigation measures and facilitating factors identified in practice.

Internal Barriers — administrative and organisational

114. The lengthy evaluation and contracting process is the most frequently reported internal barrier, with delays of 8–10 months and, in some cases, even longer periods between the submission of the application and the signing of the contract, especially in the case of local public administrations. The main effects reported include the loss of economic and technological relevance of the proposed solutions, expiry of offers, the need for rebudgeting and difficulties in maintaining the initially proposed suppliers. The case studies confirm the emergence of these effects also in the case of SMEs, where they generated mismatches between procurement plans and the dynamics of the IT market, affecting the pace and coherence of implementation.
115. Administrative bureaucracy and the lack of predictability of the evaluation process are identified as major barriers to implementation, affecting investment planning and the synchronisation of procurement stages.
116. In the case of local public administrations, the duration of the evaluation process and uncertainty regarding project approval affect the capacity of local authorities to plan internal resources in advance, including human resources, budgets and administrative capacity, especially where several projects were submitted in parallel. The lack of predictability regarding evaluation results may make it more difficult to organise the preparatory stages of implementation and to mobilise internal teams in due time, with effects on the initial pace of project launch.
117. In the case of SMEs, the same delays and lack of predictability mainly affected the updating and adaptation of technical specifications to the rapid evolution of the IT market. In practice, this context led to temporary mismatches between the solutions proposed at submission stage and those effectively available at the time of implementation, with an impact on the pace and coherence of projects.
118. **Organisational and implementation difficulties faced by beneficiaries.** During the implementation stage, SMEs reported recurrent challenges related to:
- complex administrative procedures, including reporting, repeated requests for the same documents and payments;
 - the relationship with suppliers and the technical integration of solutions;
 - the lack of internal human resources and IT expertise, especially in the case of small companies.
119. These constraints are amplified by limited administrative capacity and by the absence of internal structures dedicated to the management of digital projects.
120. **A “scoring-oriented” project design culture and its effects on implementation.** The interviews, workshops, and case studies highlighted the negative impact of a project design culture oriented mainly towards maximising the score, driven by the technical and financial evaluation grids, where some criteria are perceived as open to interpretation. In the absence of a clear orientation towards the intended results in use and the real impact of projects, the proposed solutions tend to be over-detailed from a technical perspective, without guaranteeing more efficient implementation or proportionate benefits. This approach generated structural technical rigidity, amplified by the long evaluation period and by the accelerated dynamics of the IT market. In numerous cases, the technologies and equipment initially proposed no longer existed at the time of procurement, requiring successive notifications to update plans and specifications.

- 121. Lack of intermediate information and feedback mechanisms in the evaluation process.** Beneficiaries and consultants reported the absence of formal intermediate milestones in the evaluation process, such as provisional results or intermediate lists, which increased uncertainty regarding the chances of obtaining funding and made it more difficult to prepare the implementation stages.
- 122. Variability in the quality of consultancy during the project design phase and its effects on implementation.** The interviews and workshops highlighted significant differences in the quality of digitalisation projects, correlated with the level of practical IT experience of the consultants involved. Projects developed with input from consultants with relevant technical experience generally proved to be more coherent, better adapted to IT market dynamics and more sustainable in implementation, with realistic and applicable specifications.
- 123.** By contrast, projects developed mainly from an administrative-procedural perspective placed emphasis on formal compliance with evaluation criteria, with a lower degree of technical flexibility and adaptation to the effective use of solutions, which generated additional difficulties during the implementation stage.

External Barriers — Contextual Factors

- 124.** Beyond internal administrative constraints, beneficiaries reported the existence of recurrent external barriers, highlighted through the survey, interviews, workshops and case studies, which directly influenced the pace and predictability of implementation:
- 125.** The increase in IT equipment prices and inflation, correlated with exchange rate volatility, increased procurement costs and reduced the relevance of the initial offers. The case studies and workshop discussions show that many of the proposed equipment items and licences were no longer available in the same configuration at the time of procurement, while IT providers became reluctant to maintain firm offers over long periods.
- 126.** The shortage of IT specialists on the local market, especially in less developed counties, limited beneficiaries' capacity to ensure adequate technical support, integration and maintenance, affecting the sustainability of the implemented solutions.
- 127.** The general economic context, including the effects of the war in Ukraine and macroeconomic uncertainties, influenced financial planning and risk management, especially for SMEs, increasing project vulnerability to delays and budget adjustments. These findings converge with the results of studies and analyses published by the Authority for the Digitalisation of Romania on the digitalisation of the public and private sectors, which highlight the impact of macroeconomic factors and IT market instability on the capacity to implement digitalisation projects.
- 128.** Cash-flow constraints were reported by some SMEs, especially those with limited liquidity, even in the context of the advance payment mechanisms provided by the implementation framework. The case studies show that the time gaps between incurring expenditure and receiving reimbursement, including those related to administrative processes, may generate pressure on cash flow and affect the pace of project implementation.

Mitigation measures and facilitating factors

- 129.** At the same time, beneficiaries' experience indicates a series of measures and factors that contributed to maintaining implementation and mitigating the impact of external barriers:

130. The institutional support provided by RDA Centre was perceived as a stabilising factor in implementation, appreciated for targeted technical clarifications, direct communication and a higher degree of flexibility compared with the previous programming cycle.
131. The involvement of private consultants with technical expertise represented a critical success factor, especially for SMEs without dedicated internal skills, supporting beneficiaries in interpreting requirements and adapting solutions to the real constraints of the IT market.
132. Constant cooperation with IT providers, including through iterative working mechanisms and frequent communication, facilitated the adjustment of solutions and the management of technical risks during implementation.
133. The existence of a stable internal team, capable of managing procurement, reporting and the relationship with suppliers, contributed to reducing administrative bottlenecks and to better coordination of activities.
134. The “success triangle” identified in the case studies — internal capacity, competent technical consultants, and engaged suppliers — was associated with faster and more sustainable results. The practices observed include iterative project management, digital maturity assessments before project design, phased implementation of solutions, and the use of local suppliers for maintenance and post-implementation support.
135. Results-oriented project design, namely defining solutions in relation to operational needs and expected results, without anchoring them in excessively detailed technical descriptions, the use of pilots for interdependent solutions, and applied staff training on the systems effectively implemented contributed to increasing implementation effectiveness.

Main Findings Related to EQ4

136. The main barriers to project implementation are procedural and administrative in nature, being linked in particular to the duration of the evaluation and contracting stages, the perceived complexity of administrative procedures, the limited administrative and technical capacity of some beneficiaries, and cash-flow pressures in the case of some SMEs.
137. The convergence between the survey, interviews, workshops and case studies shows that these barriers are amplified by the rapid dynamics of the IT market and by the shortage of digital skills at the local level. In the absence of greater procedural predictability, there is a risk of significant implementation delays or of projects remaining anchored in technological solutions that quickly become outdated, despite the clarification and operational support efforts provided by the Managing Authority.
138. The analysis confirms the existence of key facilitating factors common to all types of beneficiaries, but with differentiated effects depending on their typology. Internal capacity, organisational leadership, cooperation with IT providers and consultants’ expertise, complemented by the institutional support provided by RDA Centre through clarifications, direct communication and targeted technical support, explain the variations in effectiveness observed between beneficiaries.
139. The case studies show that projects with higher effectiveness are those where there is a clear vision of digitalisation, stable internal teams and solutions configured on the basis of real operational needs, not exclusively on standardised scoring-oriented requirements, while also benefiting from a functional and predictable relationship with the implementation authority.

140. In conclusion, implementation effectiveness is not limited by the intervention design, but by the way in which the procedural framework interacts with a dynamic technological and economic context. It can be strengthened by increasing the predictability of evaluation and contracting processes, publishing intermediate results, simplifying reporting and procurement flows, and continuing and consolidating direct dialogue between RDA Centre, evaluators and beneficiaries, without changing the eligibility or evaluation rules.

✓ **EQ5. To what extent has Priority 2 led to the development of digital solutions in the public sector / the digitalisation of SMEs?**

Role of Evaluation Question EQ5

141. Evaluation Question EQ5 analyses the extent to which the interventions have contributed to the development and adoption of digital solutions in the public and private sectors, from the perspective of the typology of solutions financed, the degree of use, the level of innovation and the perceived usefulness for beneficiaries.

Analytical Approach

142. The analysis refers to the situation of projects existing at the evaluation reference date, 30 April 2025, when 20 projects were contracted under Action 2.2 “Digitalisation of SMEs”, while the interventions targeting local public administrations were still in the evaluation stage. For the quantitative analysis component, the reference base was updated at the time of the survey launch, when the number of contracted projects had reached 38. The analysis is oriented towards the mechanisms for developing and using digital solutions and is based on the results of surveys, interviews, thematic workshops, and case studies, complemented by the analysis of the documentation submitted by local public administrations.

Level of adoption and use of digital solutions

143. The data collected indicate a significant level of early adoption of digital solutions among SMEs with contracted projects, even though most of them are still in the implementation stage. Beneficiaries report partial use of the solutions developed, such as ERP, CRM, BI, and web applications, with effects already visible on the internal organisation, reduced processing times, and access to data relevant for managerial decision-making.
144. In the case of local public administrations, the analysis of submitted documentation and survey responses indicates strong interest and a clear orientation towards modernising digital infrastructure, despite the fact that, at the time of the analysis, no projects had yet been contracted.
145. Interviews with beneficiaries and consultants confirm that, at this stage, Priority 2 “A Digital Region” functions mainly as a mechanism for initiating digitalisation processes, rather than as an instrument for advanced digital transformation. Most SMEs start from a low level of digital maturity, with over 40% having no previous experience and 27% having only limited initiatives, and the funding is perceived primarily as an opportunity for a structured entry into digitalisation. Consultants emphasise the potential of the intervention to stimulate basic digitalisation, provided that the impact is supported by the quality of the solutions chosen and by the organisational capacity of beneficiaries.

Typology and level of innovation of the solutions developed

- 146.** Data from the main survey applied to SMEs with contracted projects indicate that the digital solutions purchased or planned are predominantly focused on operational digitalisation and process integration, in line with the objectives of SO 1.2 and SO 1.4. The most frequently mentioned investments concern software for design, simulation and modelling, namely CAD/CAM, 64%, integrated ERP/CRM/SCM systems, 59%, e-commerce platforms, 47%, and cloud computing solutions, 19.4%. This structure confirms the orientation of the intervention towards the modernisation of internal processes and the consolidation of basic digital infrastructure.
- 147.** The use of emerging technologies among beneficiary SMEs remains limited. Process automation, namely RPA/BPM, is mentioned by less than one fifth of respondents, 17%, while IoT, Business Intelligence and AI solutions have a marginal share, below 10%, and 3% in the case of AI. This distribution is consistent with the current level of digital maturity of SMEs and with the objectives of the calls, which mainly targeted the adoption and use of basic and intermediate digital solutions, rather than the large-scale implementation of advanced innovative solutions.
- 148.** In this context, Priority 2 functions as a mechanism for incremental digitalisation for SMEs, appropriate to the profile of beneficiaries. At the same time, the case studies show that some projects integrated innovative components, such as mobile applications, BI, sensors and 3D/VR technologies, where the organisational and technical conditions were favourable, highlighting the potential of the intervention without suggesting a general expectation of advanced innovation.
- 149.** In the case of local public administrations, the planned solutions indicate clear differentiation according to the type of administrative-territorial unit: communes and small towns aim at the basic digitalisation of internal processes, while municipalities target integrated Smart City solutions oriented towards interoperability and digital services for citizens.

Perceived usefulness and added value of digital solutions

- 150.** According to the data collected through the survey, interviews, workshops, and case studies, SME beneficiaries' perception of the usefulness of digital solutions is predominantly positive. Even during the implementation phase, beneficiaries anticipate concrete benefits, such as increased productivity, operational efficiency, improved customer relations, greater process traceability and improved data quality. The case studies also confirm that integrating staff training and skills development components is an essential factor for the effective use of the digital solutions implemented.
- 151.** In the public sector, the usefulness of planned investments is mainly associated with the simplification of administrative procedures, reduced bureaucracy, and improved relations with citizens. However, representatives of local public administrations and digitalisation consultants emphasise that the shortage of internal technical skills represents a major risk for the sustainability of projects, especially in the case of communes and small towns.
- 152.** Given that local public administration projects are still in the evaluation stage, the impact is anticipated to be differentiated, depending on the degree of administrative and digital maturity of local authorities. In the case of communes and small towns, digitalisation mainly targets basic infrastructure and internal administrative processes, such as document management systems, electronic registers or basic public service portals. By contrast, municipalities and county capital municipalities aim at more advanced Smart City solutions, oriented towards interoperability, database integration and the expansion of digital services for citizens. In this context,

strengthening internal technical skills and developing standardised guidelines on interoperability and governmental cloud architecture are highlighted as key conditions for coherent and sustainable implementation.

- 153.** Compared with the 2014–2020 period, the interventions analysed indicate a paradigm shift, from investments predominantly oriented towards hardware to the integration of processes, skills development and an orientation towards interoperability. Although the strategic relevance of the intervention is high, the analysis shows that advanced interoperability remains insufficiently capitalised on, especially in the public sector, where the proposed solutions rather aim at point-to-point connections than at genuine integration of data and services.

Main findings related to EQ5

- 154.** The analysis highlights coherent causal relationships between the types of interventions financed and the observed or anticipated results, validated through the convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence, namely survey, interviews and case studies. At this stage, Priority 2 “A Digital Region” functions predominantly as an incremental digital transformation mechanism rather than a disruptive one: beneficiaries progressively develop their digital infrastructure, internal skills and capacity to integrate technologies into current processes. Digitalisation takes place in stages, from investments in equipment and basic software towards process automation and the use of data to support managerial decisions.
- 155.** In the case of SMEs, Priority 2 has contributed to stimulating the adoption of digital solutions and to forming a critical mass of beneficiaries in the early or intermediate stages of digital transformation, with visible effects on internal organisation and operational efficiency. However, the impact on advanced digital innovation remains conditional on the flexibility of the administrative framework, the quality of the selected solutions and the organisational capacity of beneficiaries to integrate and use the implemented technologies sustainably.
- 156.** In the medium term, the effectiveness and sustainability of the development of digital solutions under Priority 2 will depend on three key directions:
- strengthening beneficiaries’ internal digital skills through practical and applied training and post-implementation support;
 - continuing the adaptation of guidelines and procedures, a process already underway and confirmed through discussions with RDA representatives, including through the introduction and clarification of the use of SaaS-type solutions, so that the implementation framework reflects developments in digital technologies, such as AI, interoperability, cloud and RPA, without making the design of solutions overly rigid;
 - the transition towards performance-based specifications and evaluation criteria focused on results in use, moving beyond the descriptive logic of technical solutions and allowing the adoption of software solutions that are equivalent in terms of the results achieved, in line with the real objectives of digital transformation.

✓ **EQ6. What are the causal mechanisms that produce effects and what are their characteristics? How has the intervention been adapted to subsequent technological or scientific developments in the field of interest?**

Role of Evaluation Question EQ6

157. Evaluation Question EQ6 analyses the internal functioning logic of Priority 2 “A Digital Region”, with a focus on the causal mechanisms through which the financed activities generate results and effects for beneficiaries. The analysis examines the conditions under which these mechanisms function or are limited, as well as the extent to which the intervention has adapted to rapid technological developments in the field of digitalisation. EQ6 complements EQ5 by shifting the focus from the types of solutions developed to how and why these solutions produce, or do not produce, effects, and to the capacity of the implementation framework to allow innovation and adaptation over time.

Analytical Approach

158. At the time of the evaluation, only SME projects under Action 2.2 had been contracted, which gives the EQ6 analysis a predominantly explanatory and prospective character. The analysis is based on the correlation of the results of the main survey applied to contracted SMEs, interviews with beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries, consultants and IT providers, qualitative evidence from the case studies, as well as the analysis of the procedural framework and evaluation criteria. This approach makes it possible to reconstruct the causal mechanisms and assess the degree of adaptation of the intervention to technological progress, beyond immediate results.

Clarity of the Causal Relationship between Activities and Results

159. The causal relationship between the financed activities, namely the implementation of software solutions, staff training, and the digital integration of processes, and the anticipated results, such as increased efficiency, cost reduction and improved interoperability, is perceived by beneficiaries as clear and direct. According to the main survey addressed to SMEs with contracted projects, 85% of respondents consider that the activities carried out will make a concrete contribution to achieving the planned results, while 86% state that they are satisfied with the progress achieved so far.
160. The triangulated data analysis highlights three main causal mechanisms through which the intervention produces effects:
- **Internal capacity:** Implementation is more effective when beneficiaries have adequate internal resources, including digital skills, dedicated staff and management involvement. The case studies indicate faster progress and tangible results, such as reduced processing times and integration of data flows, where staff training was integrated as part of the project.
 - **External cooperation:** The quality and relevance of digital solutions are strongly influenced by the relationship with IT providers and specialised consultants. Beneficiaries that maintained functional partnerships, iterative feedback, and continuous testing reported solutions that were better adapted to real needs and more coherent implementation.
 - **Strategic conditionality:** The introduction of the digitalisation plan, mandatory training and digital maturity criteria, such as DESI, acted as a quality filter, orienting projects towards the integration of solutions into organisational processes and towards a minimum level of strategic alignment. Although implementation is uneven, this mechanism contributes to creating a common basis for the digital transition.

Internal and External Factors and Contextual Conditions

161. The functioning of these mechanisms is conditioned by a combination of internal and external factors, clearly highlighted by the results of the survey applied to beneficiaries (N = 40):
162. **Beneficiaries' internal capacity**, namely human resources, organisation and logistics, is the most important success factor for implementation, with a weighted average score of 4.42. Almost two thirds of respondents, 65%, assessed this factor as having maximum influence, score 5, confirming the positive correlation between internal capacity and project progress.
163. **The regulatory and procedural framework** has a strong influence on implementation, with an average score of 4.31, while 60% of respondents assigned it the maximum level of influence. This result indicates that, from the beneficiaries' perspective, the complexity of administrative and procedural requirements can influence the pace of implementation and the capacity to adjust projects during implementation, especially in the context of rapid technological developments.
164. **Partnerships, especially with IT providers and consultants**, are a key internal factor, with an average score of 4.20, and more than half of respondents, 59%, assessing them as having maximum influence on implementation success. This supports the external cooperation mechanism as a determinant of the quality of digital solutions.
165. **The availability of suppliers and IT solutions** has a strong influence, with an average score of 4.19, and 59% of respondents indicating maximum impact, reflecting the dependence of projects on IT market dynamics and on suppliers' capacity to deliver adapted solutions.
166. **Local conditions**, such as infrastructure and local support, have a relatively moderate impact on implementation success, with an average score of 3.49, suggesting that, in the case of digitalisation projects, organisational and governance factors are more decisive than the local context itself.

Adaptation of the Intervention to Technological Progress

167. The intervention demonstrated a moderate capacity to adapt to technological progress, reflected in the typology of solutions implemented or planned by SMEs, according to the results of the survey, workshops and case studies. The focus remains on basic technologies, such as ERP/CRM, CAD/CAM and cloud, while the use of emerging technologies, including AI, IoT, RPA and VR/AR, remains limited.
168. Adaptation to technological progress was not an explicit objective of the funding framework, but occurred on a case-by-case basis at the level of individual projects, through beneficiaries' initiative and with consultants' support. The calls allowed such adaptation within the established limits, without systematically aiming to promote advanced digital solutions. In this context, the perception expressed by approximately one third of respondents that the applicant guidelines do not sufficiently reflect new technological trends indicates the rapid pace of technological developments rather than a misalignment of the intervention with its assumed objectives.
169. RDA Centre contributed to accommodating this dynamic through flexible interpretations of the evaluation criteria, which allowed the inclusion of emerging technologies even when they were not explicitly included in the reference indicators, such as DESI 2019. At the same time, beneficiaries and consultants report a time lag between the accelerated pace of technological developments and the sequence of procedural stages associated with the funding process.

170. Particularly in the case of Call 2.2 targeting SMEs, which involved an extended evaluation and contracting process, there were situations in which certain technological solutions included in the funding applications were no longer available or up to date at the time of implementation, due to the rapid evolution cycles in the IT sector. The long duration of the evaluation and contracting stages, in an external context marked by the accelerated pace of technological change, may affect the relevance of the proposed solutions during implementation.

Durability and Long-Term Relevance

171. The perception of contracted SMEs regarding the sustainability of results is moderately positive but heterogeneous. Approximately half of the respondents do not anticipate major difficulties, while one third identify risks related to human and financial resources.
172. The case studies confirm that durability depends mainly on the internal capacity to operate and maintain digital solutions, as well as on the continuity of cooperation with IT providers after project completion. The lack of post-implementation technical support is identified as one of the main vulnerabilities.

Main Findings Related to EQ6

173. The analysis of quantitative and qualitative data indicates that Priority 2 “A Digital Region” activates coherent causal mechanisms that generate real digitalisation effects. However, these mechanisms function predominantly within an incremental logic, specific to an early stage of digital transformation.
174. In the case of SMEs, effects are produced gradually, by combining the implementation of operational digital solutions, such as ERP, CRM, cloud and CAD/CAM, with the development of internal skills and cooperation with IT providers. The high share of beneficiaries implementing complex digital solutions for the first time confirms the role of the intervention as a catalyst for basic digitalisation, rather than for advanced technological innovation.
175. For local public administrations, the causal mechanisms are, for the time being, anticipated, as the projects have not yet been contracted. Nevertheless, the analysis indicates a clear orientation towards integrated and interoperable digital services, with significant differences depending on the administrative capacity and level of digital maturity of administrative-territorial units.
176. The adaptation of the intervention to technological progress has taken place mainly at the level of individual projects, through beneficiaries’ initiative and consultants’ support, and less through structural mechanisms within the funding framework. At the same time, the long duration of evaluation and contracting processes limits the intervention’s capacity to rapidly integrate emerging technologies and to orient projects towards operational results and effective use.
177. Overall, the effectiveness of the causal mechanisms is determined to a greater extent by administrative flexibility, beneficiaries’ internal capacity and the quality of cooperation with IT providers than by the typology of technologies financed. The existence of sufficiently flexible mechanisms that allow technological solutions to be updated during implementation can support an increase in the operational impact of projects, especially with regard to the effective integration of digital solutions into organisational processes.

✓ **EQ7. To what extent are the costs associated with the interventions under Priority 2 justified by the benefits generated? Are there more efficient alternatives or significant differences between projects in the region or projects financed under other relevant programmes, such as the NRRP and PoCIDIF? What are the causes of these differences?**

Role of Evaluation Question EQ7

- 178.** The analysis examines the efficiency of the interventions under Priority 2 “A Digital Region” from the perspective of the cost–benefit ratio, assessing the extent to which the financial resources allocated are proportionate to the results obtained or anticipated. The evaluation considers direct economic benefits, such as operational efficiency, cost savings, and productivity, intangible benefits, such as process quality, organisational capacity, and competitiveness, as well as the existence of significant differences between types of beneficiaries and in relation to other relevant programmes, such as the NRRP and PoCIDIF.

Analytical Approach

- 179.** Given the current stage of implementation, the EQ7 analysis is predominantly prospective and oriented towards informed perceptions and economic mechanisms, rather than towards the full measurement of final effects. At the evaluation reference date, 30 April 2025, only projects under Action 2.2 “Digitalisation of SMEs” had been contracted; their number subsequently increased, without the projects having yet reached full operational maturity.
- 180.** The analysis is based on the results of the main survey applied to SMEs with contracted projects, complemented by detailed information from the seven case studies carried out with SMEs and micro-enterprises, which illustrate different implementation models and varying levels of digital maturity. This evidence was further explored through interviews and workshops with beneficiaries and digitalisation consultants. The purpose of the analysis is to outline the anticipated impact directions relevant for assessing the efficiency and economic potential of the intervention, as well as the factors influencing the cost–benefit ratio and the structural differences between types of interventions.

Analysis of Cost Efficiency and Benefits Generated at SME Level

- 181.** The survey results indicate a predominantly positive perception of the cost–benefit ratio of the projects financed under Priority 2. Most SMEs consider that the benefits generated or anticipated largely justify the costs incurred.
- 182.** The economic benefits anticipated by SMEs are diverse and mainly reflect gains in operational efficiency and potential for economic growth. According to the results of the main survey, these are associated in particular with:
- time savings and increased operational efficiency, anticipated as high or very high by most respondents;
 - reduced administrative and operational costs, as a result of the automation and integration of internal processes;
 - improved customer relations, through CRM, e-commerce and online support;
 - access to new markets or customer segments;
 - increased capacity for analysis and managerial decision-making, through the use of data and integrated digital solutions.

The SME case studies confirm these trends, illustrating situations in which the digitalisation of processes, including ERP, CAD/CAM and integrated platforms, led to the optimisation of workflows and visible productivity gains.

183. The qualitative evidence from interviews and case studies nuances these results, illustrating the concrete mechanisms through which the anticipated benefits are produced in practice. Digitalisation is associated with reduced human errors and administrative costs through the automation of invoicing and management workflows, increased data traceability and improved monitoring of operational performance.
184. In addition, the case studies show that the introduction of integrated digital platforms and e-commerce solutions supports the diversification of services and the expansion of the customer base, with effects on customer retention and acceleration of the decision-making process. These benefits are more pronounced in projects that integrate analytical solutions, such as BI, and actively use data in operational and strategic management.
185. In addition to direct economic benefits, SMEs highlighted relevant intangible benefits, such as strengthening the organisational image, increasing partners' trust and alignment with European digitalisation and security standards. Migration to cloud and implementation of cybersecurity solutions are perceived as indicators of digital maturity and medium-term competitiveness.
186. However, the analysis reveals significant differences in economic efficiency, determined by the initial level of digital maturity and the internal capacity of beneficiaries. SMEs with internal skills and stable relationships with IT providers capitalise on investments more rapidly, while enterprises at the beginning of the digitalisation process perceive costs as higher, with benefits materialising gradually.
187. Overall, the quantitative and qualitative evidence shows that the economic efficiency of interventions for SMEs is correlated primarily with the level of integration of digital solutions, and less with the nominal value of the investment.
188. Projects that combine software and equipment purchases with the reorganisation of internal processes, staff training, and the use of data to support managerial decision-making generate faster and more consistent benefits, which justifies the associated costs. By contrast, when the intervention is limited to isolated purchases, without operational integration and automation, the cost–benefit ratio is perceived as weaker, and the economic impact tends to be delayed or diluted.
189. This differentiation explains variations in perceived efficiency among SMEs and confirms the coherence of the intervention with the initial vision of Priority 2, designed as an instrument for basic digitalisation and operational integration, targeting especially enterprises at the beginning of the digital transformation process.

Anticipated benefits at the level of local public administrations – contextual use in the Efficiency Analysis

190. In the case of local public administrations, where projects financed under Priority 2 had not yet been contracted at the time of the evaluation, economic efficiency cannot be analysed directly. Nevertheless, the case studies and documentation analysed allow the identification of the types of anticipated benefits relevant for understanding the efficiency logic of the intervention, without formulating conclusions on the cost–benefit ratio.

- 191.** Thus, in the case of local public administrations, the expected benefits of digitalisation projects mainly concern:
- increased internal efficiency through the automation of administrative workflows and reduced processing times;
 - optimisation of workflows and improved coherence between departments, through the use of document management systems and electronic registers;
 - reduction of errors and increased traceability of administrative processes;
 - improved relations with citizens, through the digitalisation of public services, online portals and interaction applications;
 - increased transparency and access to information, as a result of the standardisation and digitalisation of procedures.
- 192.** These benefits are anticipated by local authorities and the consultants involved and are aligned with the overall objectives of Priority 2. However, they cannot yet be assessed from a cost-efficiency perspective in the absence of data on actual implementation and results achieved. Consequently, they are used under EQ7 exclusively to illustrate the logical potential of the intervention, not to support conclusions on comparative economic efficiency.
- 193.** Compared with other relevant programmes, Priority 2 is perceived as a more accessible and better calibrated instrument for basic digitalisation. The NRRP and PoCIDIF are associated with more advanced technological solutions, but also with a higher level of administrative and financial complexity, being considered more suitable for beneficiaries with higher digital maturity and consolidated institutional capacity. In this context, Priority 2 functions as a catalyst for initial digitalisation, with a favourable cost–benefit ratio for SMEs.
- 194.** Interviews and discussions with consultants show that economic efficiency is lower in projects where investments focus predominantly on the acquisition of tangible assets, such as hardware and IT equipment, without clear functional integration into the digital solutions implemented. According to the funding framework, tangible assets are eligible only insofar as they are necessary and integrated into the operationalisation of digital solutions, and the analysis highlights that the cost–benefit ratio is more favourable in projects that combine these purchases with process integration, workflow automation, system interoperability, and staff training. In these cases, technology investments generate higher added value and more consistent economic benefits.
- 195.** External factors such as inflation, IT market volatility, the shortage of specialists, and the duration of administrative processes negatively influenced economic efficiency in some cases, by increasing indirect costs and requiring updated offers. These effects are felt more acutely by small enterprises with limited financial and administrative resources.

Explanatory factors of perceived efficiency and possible Improvements

- 196.** Discussions with consultants and beneficiaries indicate that the financial efficiency of projects depends mainly on the quality of the solutions implemented and their degree of integration into organisational processes, rather than on the nominal value of the investment. Costs are perceived as relatively higher in projects limited to standard purchases, such as hardware equipment or software licences, without a consistent component of integration, interoperability or automation.

197. Beneficiaries also reported that the structure of expenditure related to implementation, including consultancy services, project management, audit and staff training, together with the associated administrative requirements, may generate relatively greater pressure on small enterprises, especially those without specialised internal resources. Although the introduction of simplified costs for training represents progress compared with the 2014–2020 period, there is still a lack of uniform indicative benchmarks for certain types of digital investments, especially in the case of solutions based on licences or outsourced services.
198. In this context, consultants and beneficiaries formulated proposals to increase the efficiency of fund use, namely:
- defining indicative cost benchmarks for IT equipment and licences;
 - formulating the requirements in the funding guidelines in a way that is oriented towards results and minimum functionalities, rather than rigid technological specifications. This approach would allow the proposed solutions to be assessed according to their capacity to respond to the assumed operational needs, such as interoperability, automation and scalability, without unjustifiably restricting beneficiaries' technological options.
199. At the same time, the importance of applying the principle of proportionality in administrative requirements was emphasised, within the same set of rules, by correlating the volume and complexity of the documentation requested with the size and value of projects. Such an approach would allow the level of detail required for lower-value projects to be differentiated from that required for projects with larger budgets, without changing the eligibility rules or evaluation criteria.

Main Findings Related to EQ7

200. The triangulated analysis of data from the survey, case studies, and interviews indicates a predominantly positive cost–benefit ratio for the interventions financed under Priority 2 “A Digital Region”, especially in the case of SMEs at the beginning of the digitalisation process. The anticipated benefits, such as time savings, process integration, reduced administrative costs, and increased productivity, are perceived as proportionate to the resources invested, even though some of the effects will consolidate in the medium term.
201. The economic efficiency of the intervention differs according to the initial level of digital maturity and beneficiaries' internal capacity. Small enterprises or those at the beginning of digitalisation perceive costs as higher, with benefits materialising gradually, while SMEs with internal skills, clearly defined processes, and stable relationships with IT providers capitalise on investments more rapidly and obtain higher returns.
202. Differences in efficiency are amplified by external factors, such as IT market dynamics, including inflation, price volatility and the shortage of specialists, as well as the duration of administrative processes, which in some cases generated additional costs through re-tendering and price updates. These effects particularly affect projects in which investments in tangible assets or software licences are not sufficiently integrated into functional digital solutions effectively used in organisational processes.
203. Compared with other relevant programmes, such as the NRRP and PoCIDIF, Priority 2 is perceived as more accessible and better calibrated for basic digitalisation, offering a favourable balance between the value of the grant, administrative requirements and the benefits obtained.

204. Overall, the economic efficiency of the intervention is determined mainly by the quality of the solutions implemented, the degree to which they are integrated into organisational processes and the capacity for effective use after project completion, rather than by the nominal cost structure. Projects that combined eligible technology investments with process integration, staff training and the use of data generated a more favourable cost–benefit ratio.
205. The findings indicate that a stronger orientation towards assessing solutions based on verifiable results in use, indicative cost benchmarks, and the application of the principle of proportionality in administrative requirements would contribute to strengthening the economic efficiency of the intervention in future cycles, without changing the eligibility rules or evaluation criteria.

✓ **EQ8. To what extent can the interest shown in the launched calls be considered an indicator of efficiency?**

Role of Evaluation Question EQ8

206. EQ8 analyses the efficiency of Priority 2 “A Digital Region” from the perspective of its capacity to generate interest and mobilise demand for funding, treating the level of participation in the calls as an indirect indicator of the efficiency of the intervention. It complements EQ6 and EQ7 by shifting the focus from mechanisms and the cost–benefit ratio towards the practical attractiveness of the instrument and its capacity to reach the targeted beneficiaries.

Analytical Approach

207. The EQ8 analysis has an analytical and interpretative character, focusing on the dynamics of funding demand and beneficiaries’ perceptions, rather than on final results. The evaluation examines the level of interest and participation of potential beneficiaries, the ratio between expressed demand and the available budget, the extent to which interest materialised into eligible and contracted projects, as well as differences in behaviour and perception between local public administrations and SMEs.
208. The analysis is based on the triangulation of RDA Centre administrative data on submitted and contracted projects, the results of the survey applied to beneficiaries and funding applicants, namely contracted and non-contracted SMEs, as well as qualitative information obtained through interviews and discussion panels with consultants and representatives of public and private beneficiaries. This approach allows the expressed interest to be interpreted as an indirect indicator of efficiency, distinct from economic or operational efficiency as such.

Level of Beneficiary interest, participation and attractiveness in relation to the available budget

209. The interest shown in Priority 2 funding was significant, reflecting the adequacy of the digitalisation theme to the real needs of beneficiaries. The two calls launched by April 2025 attracted a total of 339 submitted projects, of which 204 were submitted by SMEs under Action 2.2 and 135 by local public administrations under Action 2.1.1, amounting to a total requested value of RON 406.6 million, compared with an allocation of RON 256.4 million.
210. Priority 2 “A Digital Region” has a total allocation of approximately RON 400.6 million, equivalent to EUR 80,931,720. To date, 70 projects have been contracted, with a total non-reimbursable contracted value of RON 47 million, representing approximately 11.7% of the total allocation of Priority 2.

Table 3: Status of Priority 2 by launched calls

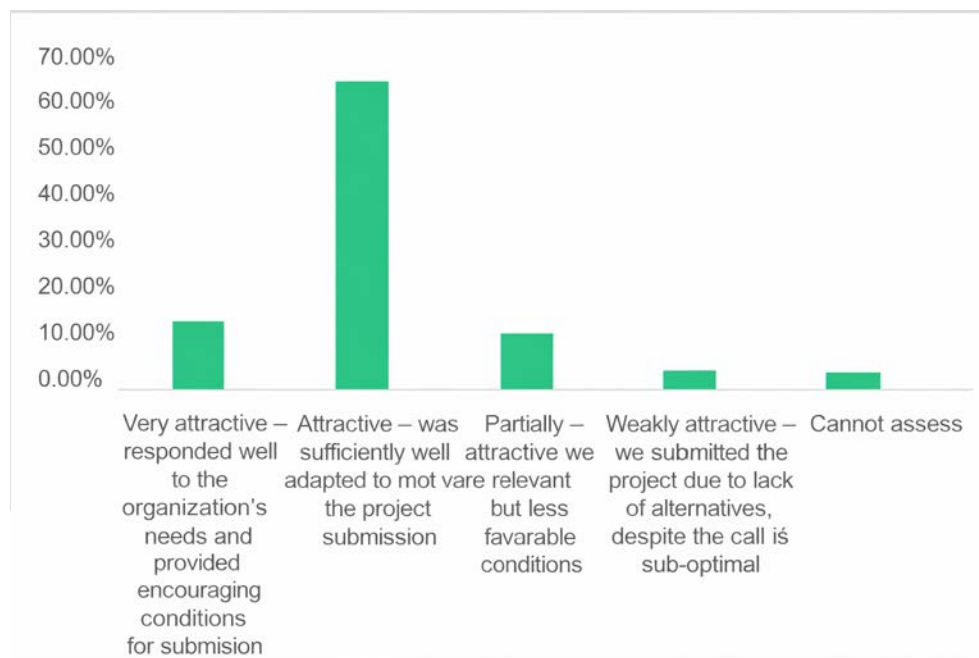
Call name	Funding available through	No. of submitted projects	Requested value (ERDF + State Budget)	Degree of interest	No. of contracted projects	Contracted non-reimbursable	Contracting rate
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	the call (RON)					le value (RON)	
PRC/444/PRC_P2/ OP1	97,537,44 0	135	268,465,527. 45	275.24 %	-	0.00	0%
PRC/172/PRC_P2/ OP1	158,924,2 17	204	138,223,627. 95	86.97%	70	47,024,958. 38	11.7%
Total	256,461,6 57	339	406,689,155. 40	159.58 %	70	47,024,958. 38	11.7%

Source: RDA Centre database

211. The level of interest in the calls launched under Priority 2 varied significantly between the two categories of beneficiaries, reflecting structural differences in needs and funding contexts. Call PRC/444, targeting local public administrations under SO 1.2, recorded a very high degree of interest, of approximately 275% of the available allocation, signalling demand well above the funding capacity. By contrast, Call PRC/172, targeting SMEs under SO 1.2 and SO 1.4, recorded a degree of interest of approximately 87%, with the total requested value below the available allocation.
212. The differences between the two calls can be explained by the profile of beneficiaries and the broader programmatic context. While local public administrations face urgent structural needs related to the digitalisation of basic services and administrative workflows, SMEs had simultaneous access to other relevant funding instruments, including the NRRP and Priority 1 “A Competitive Region”, oriented mainly towards productive and technological investments. Thus, some SMEs calibrated their funding options according to the type of investment targeted and their internal implementation capacity, which had a direct impact on the level of demand recorded under the digitalisation call within Priority 2.
213. The distribution of demand confirms the existence of substantial interest in the digitalisation interventions under Priority 2, with different levels of intensity depending on the category of beneficiary: high structural pressure in the case of local public administrations and real, but more moderate, interest in the case of SMEs.
214. Although the interest shown in the calls under Priority 2 was high, the extent to which this materialised into contracted projects evolved gradually during the period analysed. At the evaluation reference date, 30 April 2025, 20 projects had been contracted under Action 2.2 “Digitalisation of SMEs”. Subsequently, their number increased progressively, reaching 38 projects in August 2025, 57 in October 2025 and 70 contracted projects at the beginning of 2026, indicating a positive dynamic in the evaluation and contracting process.
- Beneficiaries' Perception of the attractiveness of the calls*
215. The results of the survey applied to funding applicants and beneficiaries indicate a predominantly positive perception of the attractiveness of the calls under Priority 2. Thus, over 84% of respondents assessed the calls as “attractive” or “very attractive”, while only a small share perceived them as weakly or partially attractive. These results suggest a good correlation between the theme of the calls and the needs of the targeted organisations.

Figure 6. Perception of the attractiveness of the calls



Source: Authors' processing based on the complementary survey of funding applicants

216. The main reasons for participating in the call were the relevance of the intervention to the organisation's own needs, the level of co-financing and the value of the available grant. Most respondents also appreciated the clarity of the applicant guidelines, considering that the documentation provided predictability and support for preparing applications.
217. The qualitative analysis highlights relevant differences between the perceptions of public and private beneficiaries. In the case of local public administrations, the funding guidelines were perceived as clear and adaptable to the local context, while the technical support and clarifications provided by RDA Centre contributed to strengthening trust in the programme.
218. By contrast, some SMEs perceived the call as less accessible, mainly due to the complexity of the DESI grid and the eligibility requirements considered restrictive for enterprises at the beginning of the digitalisation process. The consultants interviewed emphasised that the DESI threshold functioned, in some cases, as a formal barrier, limiting the flexibility to adapt digital solutions to the specific needs of small companies.

Main Findings Related to EQ8

219. Priority 2 proved efficient in stimulating interest and mobilising demand for digitalisation funding, although with different levels of intensity depending on the type of call and category of beneficiary. The very high interest of local public administrations confirms the attractiveness of the theme and the adequacy of the funding mechanism to the structural needs for digitalising public services. In the case of SMEs, the expressed interest, although below the level of the available allocation, indicates the real attractiveness of the intervention, confirmed by the positive perception of the calls, but moderated by the existence of alternative funding sources and by the administrative and financial capacity limitations of small enterprises.
220. The difference between the expressed interest and the contracting rate mainly reflects administrative and timing constraints, not a lack of relevance or attractiveness of the intervention.

221. The high interest recorded among local public administrations and the moderate but consistent interest among SMEs indicate distinct dynamics in the use of the instrument, depending on the structural needs and implementation capacity of beneficiaries.
222. Overall, the interest in the calls launched under Priority 2 can be considered a robust indirect indicator of the efficiency of the intervention, reflecting the perceived value of the programme and its capacity to attract new beneficiaries into the digitalisation process.

✓ **EQ9. To what extent are the costs of digitalising public services/ SMEs through Priority 2 justified by the overall benefits?**

Role of Evaluation Question EQ9

223. EQ9 analyses whether the investments made through Priority 2, “A Digital Region,” are justified by the overall benefits generated from an aggregate and cross-cutting perspective. Unlike EQ7, which focuses on efficiency at the project level, and EQ8, which uses interest as an indirect indicator of efficiency, EQ9 assesses whether Priority 2 generates, overall, benefits that are proportionate to the public resources allocated, from the perspective of observable results, effective use and sustainability potential.

Analytical Approach

224. The EQ9 analysis focuses on the reported and anticipated benefits of the intervention and on the first observable results within organisations. The evaluation considers exclusively the contracted SME projects, as these represent the only category of beneficiaries for which relevant data on implementation and use of digital solutions are available.
225. The analysis is based on the triangulation of the results of the main survey applied to SME beneficiaries, the qualitative information obtained through interviews and panels with beneficiaries and consultants, as well as the evidence from anonymised case studies. This approach makes it possible to assess the perceived cost-benefit ratio and anticipated sustainability, while clearly distinguishing between direct organisational benefits and broader economic effects.

Cost–Anticipated Result Ratio

226. The results of the main survey applied to contracted SMEs indicate a predominantly positive perception of the cost-benefit ratio of the interventions financed under Priority 2. Most respondents consider that the results obtained or expected are proportionate to the resources invested, suggesting an efficient use of public funds in relation to the objectives pursued. Approximately half of the respondents assess the cost-benefit ratio as very good, and more than a quarter as good, meaning that, for more than three quarters of beneficiaries, the interventions generate results perceived as relevant and adequate in relation to the costs incurred.
227. A smaller segment of respondents assesses the cost-benefit ratio as acceptable, indicating the existence of relevant results that, at this stage of implementation, are associated with costs perceived as high. In addition, a limited number of beneficiaries state that they cannot yet fully assess the impact of the projects, given the early stage of implementation. It is relevant that no respondent assessed the projects as having a poor cost-benefit ratio, which confirms a high level of confidence in the added value of the funding provided through Priority 2, even in the absence of consolidated final results.
228. The analysis suggests that perceived efficiency is determined mainly by tangible organisational benefits, namely time savings, reduced operational costs, and optimisation of internal processes,

rather than by market-level or macroeconomic effects. These results indicate that Priority 2 is perceived as an intervention with concrete economic value for beneficiaries, even before the full materialisation of final effects.

Qualitative evidence on economic efficiency

229. The triangulation of survey data with information obtained from interviews, discussion panels, and case studies confirms this positive perception. Beneficiaries and consultants highlighted concrete effects on economic performance and internal management capacity, especially in the case of projects that integrated digital solutions into current operating processes.
230. The benefits are already translating into observable results, reported by beneficiaries in the form of reduced working times and administrative costs. Estimates communicated in the case studies indicate average reductions in processing times of 20–30% and decreases in administrative costs of 15–25%, as a result of implementing ERP, CRM, document management, electronic invoicing or operational workflow automation solutions. Although these values are indicative, they outline a consistently positive trend in the cost-benefit ratio, especially among SMEs with adequate internal integration capacity.
231. **Table 4: Examples from the case studies – benefits and anticipated economic impact**

Beneficiary	Type of financed solution	Observed/anticipated benefits	Indicative estimates
SME in the tourism sector	Integrated ERP system covering reservations, management and accounting	Reduced operating times and automation of accounting workflows	Around 30% reduction in processing times
SME in the design sector	Digitalisation of design processes	Faster documentation workflow and increased accuracy of deliverables	Around 25% reduction in documentation time
SME in the construction sector	Works and equipment management system	Optimisation of work routes and reduction of operational errors	Around 20% reduction in indirect costs
SME in creative services	Digital analysis and marketing platform	Expansion of the client portfolio and increased revenue	20% increase in portfolio
SME in production	Digital archiving and document management	Increased traceability and reduced administrative expenditure	Around 15–20% cost reduction
SME in the furniture industry	Automation of quotation and order management	Improved production workflows and reduced errors	10–15% reduction in delivery time

Note: The estimates are indicative, as reported by beneficiaries or consultants in the case studies. They provide comparative indications regarding microeconomic efficiency, without representing definitive financial calculations.

260. Overall, this evidence suggests that the intervention generates direct and rapidly perceptible economic value for the financed enterprises, particularly through efficiency and productivity gains, rather than through immediate macroeconomic effects.

Degree of Sustainability of the Intervention as Perceived by Beneficiaries (SMEs)

261. With regard to sustainability, the results of the main survey indicate a moderately positive perception. Approximately half of the respondents consider that the project results will be maintained without major difficulties, while a significant share anticipate possible challenges.
262. The discussions confirm that sustainability is closely linked to the degree of integration of digital solutions into current activity. SMEs that treat digitalisation as part of their development strategy, rather than as a one-off investment, anticipate more durable benefits and a gradual reduction in operating costs. The case studies show that the cross-cutting use of digital systems, for example for customer management, accounting, and logistics, leads to more stable and more visible effects over time.

Comparability with other relevant programmes

263. In relation to other similar programmes, such as the NRRP and PoCIDIF, beneficiaries and consultants perceive Priority 2 as more balanced and more accessible for the basic digitalisation of SMEs. While national programmes target advanced technologies and involve high administrative requirements, Priority 2 is appreciated for its moderate costs, high level of non-reimbursable financing, and rapidly observable direct benefits, which lead to a cost-benefit ratio perceived as more favourable for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Main Findings

264. The analysis shows that, from the perspective of SME beneficiaries, the financed interventions offer predominantly positive value for money at this stage. Most respondents perceive the cost-benefit ratio as good or very good, with no situations reported in which the investments were considered unjustified.
265. The overall benefits of the intervention are manifested mainly at micro and organisational level, through gains in operational efficiency, reduced administrative costs and increased productivity, rather than through immediate macroeconomic effects. This orientation is coherent with the objective of Priority 2 to support basic digitalisation and strengthen the internal capacity of SMEs.
266. Perceived economic efficiency is closely correlated with the degree of effective integration of digital solutions and with beneficiaries' internal capacity to use the implemented systems. Projects that targeted the cross-cutting integration of solutions, such as ERP, CRM and workflow automation, tend to generate faster and more consistent benefits than interventions limited to isolated purchases of equipment or licences.
267. From the perspective of sustainability, beneficiaries express realistic expectations: although the premises are generally positive, maintaining benefits in the medium term depends on the capacity to manage recurrent costs, maintenance, and specialised human resources. Digitalisation integrated into the development strategy is associated with more stable and longer-lasting effects.
268. Overall, EQ9 confirms that Priority 2 can produce overall benefits proportionate to the resources invested, within the limits of the current stage of implementation. Although the final impact cannot yet be fully quantified, the intervention is emerging as efficient, relevant and cost-effective, with strong potential to consolidate the regional digital ecosystem as projects reach operational maturity.

✓ **EQ10. To what extent do other projects/interventions of the administrative-territorial unit or SME in the field of digitalisation of public services/processes correlate with the project implemented under the Priority?**

Role of Evaluation Question EQ10

269. EQ10 analyses the coherence and complementarity of the interventions financed under Priority 2 “A Digital Region” with other digitalisation projects or initiatives implemented by the same beneficiaries, namely SMEs and administrative-territorial units. The analysis aims to identify synergies, logical continuities or, conversely, any overlaps, in order to assess the extent to which Priority 2 contributes to a coherent and progressive approach to digital transformation at organisational and regional levels.

Analytical Approach

270. The EQ10 analysis is based on the data available for SMEs contracted under Action 2.2 “Digitalisation of SMEs”, the only category of beneficiaries for which relevant information is available on the implementation and integration of digital solutions.
271. The evaluation uses an integrated approach, based on the triangulation of the results of the survey applied to SME beneficiaries, the qualitative information obtained through interviews and discussion panels with beneficiaries and consultants, as well as evidence from anonymised case studies. This makes it possible to analyse the coherence of the intervention in relation to the actual digitalisation pathway of organisations, beyond declarative intentions or strategic documents.

Degree of correlation and complementarity — survey results

272. The results of the main survey indicate a moderate level of coherence between the projects financed under Priority 2 and other digitalisation initiatives implemented by SMEs. More specifically, a limited share of respondents indicate the existence of real complementarity with other investments or programmes, while the majority describe partial or non-existent functional links. This distribution reflects the fact that, for a significant share of beneficiaries, Priority 2 projects are not integrated into a broader digitalisation strategy, but rather respond to specific operational needs.
273. The quantitative data confirm this result: only 10% of respondents with contracted projects, namely 4 beneficiaries, state that they drew on good practices or experiences from other funding programmes or similar initiatives, while 90% did not use such references in the design and implementation of their projects. The open responses indicate a limited and punctual transfer, focused mainly on the use of technical documentation models, such as terms of reference, without adapting functional solutions, IT architectures or previously validated implementation models.
274. At the same time, 97.5% of the respondent SMEs stated that their digitalisation projects are designed and implemented autonomously, without systematic reference to external experiences. This result suggests that, for a significant share of beneficiaries, Priority 2 functions as the first structured investment in digitalisation, acting as an entry point into the digital transformation process rather than as a means of consolidating or expanding existing initiatives.
275. The low level of correlation does not indicate overlaps or inconsistencies between interventions, but rather reflects the early stage of beneficiaries’ digital maturity and the absence of systematic mechanisms for disseminating and capitalising on experience accumulated at regional or national level. The share of respondents who state that they cannot yet assess the degree of correlation

is explained by the fact that projects are still under implementation and the medium-term integration of digital solutions is not yet fully visible.

Differentiated Interpretation — SMEs vs. Local Public Administrations

276. In the case of SMEs, the coherence of interventions is mainly reflected at internal operational level. Priority 2 projects are frequently integrated with internal processes that were already partially digitalised, through solutions such as ERP, CRM, CAD systems or management applications, even in the absence of formal digitalisation strategies.
277. The case study analysis highlights clear functional synergies and technological continuities. In some cases, Priority 2 investments extend systems previously developed using own funds; in others, the implemented solutions are complementary to existing infrastructure, without overlaps, but with potential for subsequent interconnection.
278. For local public administrations, the empirical analysis is limited by the contracting calendar. Nevertheless, the qualitative information suggests favourable premises for a higher level of coherence, due to the integrated nature of the digitalisation of public services, including interoperability, one-stop shops, and electronic archives. The lack of data reflects only the implementation calendar, not the absence of a correlation logic.

Qualitative Aspects — Lessons and Punctual Synergies

279. The interviews and case studies indicate that, at this stage, correlations between projects are functional rather than strategic, reflecting an incremental process of learning and adaptation. Beneficiaries mentioned:
- reuse of models for terms of reference and security requirements inspired by other programmes, such as the NRRP;
 - harmonisation of implemented solutions with national interoperability standards;
 - extension of existing internal initiatives, such as the automation of accounting, quotation or project management workflows.
280. At the same time, the lack of formal coordination or good practice exchange mechanisms means that this coherence is expressed mainly at the organisational, micro level, rather than at systemic or regional level.

Table 5: Examples from the case studies — correlations and complementarities identified

Beneficiary	Type of Priority 2 project	Correlation with other initiatives	Type of coherence observed
SME in the construction sector	Works and equipment management system	Extends an internal management platform developed previously	Vertical synergy, complementing existing infrastructure
SME in tourism	ERP integrated with reservations and accounting modules	Complementary to its own online sales platform	Functional integration, without overlap
SME in creative industries	Data analysis and digital marketing platform	Correlated with private projects for online promotion and web development	Thematic and objective-level coherence
SME in production	Digital quotation and order management system	Connectable with internal design applications implemented previously	Technological continuity

SME architecture and design	in	Digitalisation of design processes	First investment of this type; potential correlation with archiving workflows	Emerging operational coherence
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Main Findings Related to EQ10

- 305. The coherence of the interventions financed under Priority 2 is reflected mainly at the internal operational level, rather than at the strategic level. In the case of SMEs, the supported projects functioned more as starting points for the digitalisation process, creating the premises for future developments and for future correlations with other initiatives or support programmes.
- 306. The analysis did not identify overlaps or duplications between the interventions financed under Priority 2 and other relevant programmes, and the risk of incoherence is low. Priority 2 is positioned as a complementary instrument, which complements other sources of funding without competing with them.
- 307. In the case of local public administrations, a higher potential for coherence is anticipated, determined by the common objectives of digitalising and standardising public services. However, the projects mainly target punctual connections to national platforms, while interoperability between local systems remains limited, indicating the need for a more integrated approach in the next stages.
- 308. Overall, Priority 2 contributes to building a coherent and complementary basis for digitalisation investments, with clear potential for progressive integration into a broader regional strategic framework as beneficiaries' digital maturity becomes more consolidated.

✓ **EQ11. How and to what extent are the requirements regarding the principles of sustainable development, equal opportunities and non-discrimination, and gender equality reflected in the contracted projects?**

Role of Evaluation Question EQ11

- 309. EQ11 analyses how the horizontal principles, namely, sustainable development, equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and gender equality, are integrated into the projects financed under Priority 2. The evaluation examines both compliance with the formal requirements set out in the funding documentation and the reflection of these principles in the digital solutions implemented and in the organisational practices associated with the projects.

Analytical Approach

- 310. The EQ11 analysis examines how horizontal principles are integrated and applied in the financed projects, beyond compliance with the formal requirements set out in the funding guidelines. The evaluation focuses on the practical relevance of these principles for digitalisation projects and on the extent to which they are reflected in the solutions implemented and in the organisational practices of beneficiaries.
- 311. The analysis is based on an integrated approach, combining the results of the survey applied to beneficiaries and funding applicants with qualitative information obtained from interviews, workshops and anonymised case studies. This method makes it possible to clearly distinguish between the integration of horizontal principles at the declarative or procedural level and their effective application in digitalisation projects.

Formal integration of the principles into projects

- 312.** The results of the survey applied to beneficiaries and funding applicants indicate that the integration of horizontal principles into Priority 2 projects was achieved without major difficulties in most cases, although with varying degrees of administrative effort and adaptation. Thus, 50% of respondents state that they encountered difficulties to a large or very large extent, suggesting that applying the requirements related to horizontal themes involved a significant level of clarification and compliance, especially for beneficiaries with limited experience in implementing projects financed from European funds. At the same time, 32.5% of respondents indicate limited difficulties, to a small or very small extent, while 10% consider that they did not encounter difficulties, signalling a good understanding and application of the requirements.
- 313.** As regards the types of measures implemented, 40% of respondents included sustainable development measures, such as energy efficiency and reduction of environmental impact, 37.5% integrated measures related to equal opportunities and non-discrimination, and 35% included actions related to gender equality. At the same time, only 7.5% of beneficiaries, corresponding to 3 projects, stated that they had included additional measures beyond the minimum requirements of the call, confirming that, in most cases, horizontal principles were approached as an exercise in procedural compliance rather than as a strategic element or a generator of operational added value.

Practical application of the principles in implementation

- 314.** Most respondents consider that horizontal principles are relevant and relatively easy to apply in the context of digitalisation projects. Approximately two-thirds consider that these principles are integrated to a large or very large extent into project activities, while only a small share report implementation difficulties.
- 315.** Sustainable development is the most visible principle in practice, being directly linked to the nature of digital investments: the elimination of physical documents, reduced resource consumption, process optimisation and, implicitly, a reduced environmental footprint. By contrast, the principles of equal opportunities and gender equality are less frequently translated into specific actions, remaining largely at the level of general organisational practices, without dedicated training, promotion or social innovation interventions.
- 316.** The interviews and case studies confirm this differentiation: beneficiaries recognise the importance of horizontal principles, but perceive them as having indirect relevance for technological investments, especially in the case of small SMEs. Consultants emphasise that the standardised wording of the requirements in the guidelines tends to encourage conservative approaches, limiting beneficiaries' initiative to propose measures with a more pronounced social or environmental impact.

Good Practices Identified

- 317.** In order to assess the potential of these principles to generate sustainable effects, the case studies provide several illustrative examples:

Table 6: Examples of integration of horizontal principles in the projects analysed through case studies

Type of measure	Observed / potential effect	Type of principle promoted
Introduction of electronic archiving and elimination of physical documents	Reduced paper consumption and storage space	Sustainable development
Implementation of a digital workflow for design and review	Around 30% reduction in the consumption of printed materials	Sustainable development
Promotion of gender balance in the IT development team	Equal participation of women in technical and management roles	Gender equality
Adaptation of the digital system for staff with different usage needs	Accessibility and digital inclusion	Equal opportunities/non-discrimination
Training of staff of both genders in the use of the ERP platform	Equal access to digital skills	Equal opportunities and gender equality

Main Findings EQ11

318. Horizontal principles are adequately integrated into the projects financed under Priority 2, particularly those related to sustainable development and equal access to resources, reflecting compliance with the requirements of the applicant guidelines and a general understanding of their relevance in digitalisation projects.
319. However, in most cases their application remains predominantly formal and limited in strategic depth, especially among SMEs, where the principles of equal opportunities, non-discrimination and gender equality are perceived as having indirect relevance for technological investments and are treated mainly as compliance requirements.
320. Overall, Priority 2 respects the horizontal principles in a manner proportionate to the nature of the financed interventions, providing a solid basis for integrating sustainability and inclusion dimensions. However, there is clear potential to strengthen their added value by moving towards more concrete measures better adapted to the beneficiaries' operational context.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNT

Relevance (EQ1)

321. Priority 2 "A Digital Region" fully confirms its strategic relevance, being coherently aligned with European and national objectives on digital transformation, including the Digital Compass 2030, the Digital Romania Strategy 2030, and RIS3 Centre. The intervention responds to persistent structural needs of the Centre Region, in particular the low level of digital maturity among SMEs and the fragmentation of IT infrastructure and digital processes in local public administrations.
322. Beneficiaries perceive the intervention as well adapted to their immediate needs, with a focus on the digitalisation of internal processes, data management, and the integration of IT systems. Compared with the 2014–2020 period, Priority 2 marks a paradigm shift, moving from isolated

investments in hardware equipment towards integrated solutions focused on processes and digital skills. However, the components related to interoperability, innovation, and advanced use of data remain limited, especially among small SMEs.

323. Although the relevance of the intervention is strong, maintaining it in the medium and long term will depend on the programme's capacity to adapt to the accelerated pace of digital transformation. Differentiating support according to beneficiaries' level of digital maturity and periodically updating the guidelines to reflect emerging trends, such as AI, interoperability and user-oriented digital services, are essential directions for the next programming period.

Effectiveness (EQ2–EQ6)

324. At this stage, the effectiveness of the intervention is in a phase of progressive materialisation, with high impact potential, supported both by results already observable among SMEs and by solid premises for medium-term effects. The first results indicate improvements in operational efficiency, productivity, and the quality of internal processes, generated by the implementation of integrated digital solutions, such as ERP, CRM, CAD/CAM, and cloud solutions.
325. The main factors driving progress are beneficiaries' internal capacity, organisational leadership and the quality of cooperation with IT providers and consultants, as reflected in the interviews and qualitative analyses. The barriers identified are mainly procedural and organisational, including the length of the evaluation and contracting stages, the administrative rigidity perceived by beneficiaries, and the shortage of specialised human resources among beneficiaries, which limits their capacity to manage and effectively integrate digital solutions.
326. The projects financed for SMEs mainly target basic technologies aimed at building a minimum digital infrastructure, in line with the programme's vision of supporting basic digitalisation rather than advanced innovation. This orientation is coherent with the profile of beneficiaries and their current level of digital maturity. However, the evidence shows that implementation effectiveness is influenced by the predictability of administrative processes and the clarity of interaction between beneficiaries and the implementation structures.

Efficiency (EQ7–EQ9)

327. The analysis highlights a positive cost-benefit ratio and good economic efficiency. Beneficiaries report clear benefits in relation to the costs incurred, materialised through time savings, reduced administrative burden, optimisation of internal workflows and increased productivity.
328. Compared with other national programmes, such as the NRRP and PoCIDIF, Priority 2 is perceived as more accessible and better calibrated for basic digitalisation, especially for SMEs with limited administrative and technical resources. The introduction of databases with reference costs and functional evaluation criteria would contribute to increasing investment efficiency and reducing the risk of challenges.
329. The strong interest in the launched calls confirms the attractiveness and relevance of the intervention. However, overall efficiency is temporarily affected by the low contracting rate and the prolonged duration of the administrative stages, which delay the materialisation of benefits and may reduce the technological relevance of the proposed solutions.

Coherence (EQ10)

330. The degree of correlation between projects financed under Priority 2 and other digitalisation initiatives is moderate, but coherent with the current level of digital maturity of the beneficiaries.

For most SMEs, these projects represent their first structured investment in digitalisation, and coherence is mainly reflected at the operational level, through the extension or completion of existing solutions.

331. No overlaps or inconsistencies were identified among the interventions analysed. In the case of local public administrations, a higher level of coherence is expected once interinstitutional projects are implemented, although systemic interoperability remains a challenge for the next stage.

Horizontal Principles (EQ11)

332. The horizontal principles — sustainable development, equal opportunities and gender equality — are integrated into the projects financed under Priority 2, mainly at the level of procedural compliance. The sustainable development component is the best represented, through the digitalisation of processes and the reduction of resource consumption, followed by the principles of equal opportunities and gender equality, reflected mainly in the structure of project teams.
333. The application of horizontal principles remains primarily compliance-oriented, especially among SMEs, although these principles are well formulated in the evaluation criteria. Clarifying how they can be meaningfully integrated into projects, through examples and/or a good practice guide, could improve the quality of their application.

6.1 LESSONS LEARNT AND BEST PRACTICES

334. **Digitalisation produces results when it is anchored in real needs and existing processes, rather than in isolated technologies.** The case studies and interviews conducted with SMEs and local public administrations show that the most effective projects are those that start from concrete operational problems faced by organisations, such as optimising internal workflows, improving traceability or reducing processing times. In such cases, digital solutions are used as tools to address the identified problems, facilitating their integration into day-to-day activities and generating observable benefits from the early stages of implementation.
335. **Internal capacity and organisational leadership are key determinants of effectiveness, both in local public administrations and in SMEs.** In both cases, the direct involvement of leadership — mayor, executive management or administrator — and the existence of minimum internal capacity proved to be critical factors for the coherent definition of projects and effective cooperation with IT providers. Where management explicitly supported the digitalisation process, projects were better calibrated and more coherent, while the absence of such leadership increased the risk of formal interventions, primarily oriented towards compliance.
336. **The role of the consultant differs significantly between SMEs and local public administrations, influencing project results.** In local public administrations with experience or higher administrative capacity, the consultant played a role in operationalising the project and aligning it with the requirements of the guidelines, administratively translating an already mature project idea. By contrast, in small local public administrations and SMEs undertaking their first digitalisation investment, the consultant played an essential role in interpreting the guidelines, structuring the project and mediating between the technical-administrative language and the operational realities of the beneficiaries. This differentiation explains the variations observed in project coherence, feasibility and preparation pace, and highlights the need to adapt support

mechanisms and guidelines to the beneficiaries' actual capacity to understand and implement the requirements.

- 337. Differences in digital maturity explain variations in potential effectiveness and justify phased approaches.** In the case of SMEs, these differences are reflected in internal skills, previous experience in using digital solutions and the capacity to integrate them into operational processes. In the case of local public administrations, they are visible both in the degree of digitalisation of public services and in the level of digitalisation of internal processes, such as document management, electronic archiving and the use of electronic signatures, as well as in the existence of pre-existing IT systems, administrative capacity and level of interoperability. These differences reflect the absorption capacity of beneficiaries, rather than limitations of the intervention design, which is sufficiently flexible to respond to diverse needs. Calibrating support according to digital maturity refers to adapting the type and complexity of the supported interventions to beneficiaries' real needs. Indirectly, this may have implications for project value, where more complex projects associated with more advanced levels of digital maturity require more integrated solutions and higher budgets. In this logic, implementation experience suggests that, in future cycles, it would be useful to explore calls structured or differentiated according to levels of eligibility and digital maturity, as a way to respond more adequately to the diversity of beneficiaries and to ensure better alignment between the type of intervention and their profile.
- 338. Cooperation with IT providers is a key factor enabling the effectiveness and relevance of digitalisation projects.** The qualitative data show that the early involvement of IT providers and the existence of stable cooperation contributed to the definition of realistic solutions adapted to the beneficiaries' context. In SMEs, providers supported the translation of operational needs into eligible solutions, while in local public administrations, they contributed to configuring the technical architecture starting from the existing infrastructure. This lesson highlights the importance of structured technical dialogue, including during the preparation of calls, in order to reduce the risk of rigid specifications or specifications that rapidly become outdated.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for the actual programming period (2021–2027)

- 339. R1. Ensuring a balance between administrative rigour and technological flexibility in implementation**

It is recommended to apply the procedural framework in a way that ensures the administrative compliance required for the sound management of funds, while also allowing digital solutions to be adapted to technological developments and to the real functional needs of beneficiaries.

During the current period, this balance can be supported through:

- the consistent use of the principle of technical equivalence, already applied in implementation practice, which entails accepting specific technical adjustments when they respond to the same operational need and maintain the project's functionalities, objectives and indicators. In practical terms, this principle is relevant in situations such as replacing software that has become unavailable or technologically outdated with an alternative solution that provides equivalent functionalities, for example automation, interoperability

and traceability, comparable levels of performance and cost, without changing the purpose of the intervention;

- the optimisation of clarification requests, by making use of the information available in IT systems and transmitting it in a consolidated format;
- structured technical dialogue of a general nature, through thematic sessions, consolidated written clarifications or indicative guidance, to support beneficiaries and IT providers in interpreting the requirements, without requiring individual meetings for each project.

This approach allows administrative rigour to be maintained, while increasing the system's capacity to respond to the specific nature of digitalisation projects and to the accelerated pace of technological change.

340. R2. Increasing transparency and predictability in evaluation and contracting

It is recommended to improve transparency and communication during these stages, in order to facilitate project planning and management by beneficiaries.

In this respect, the following measures may be considered:

- optimising the duration of the evaluation and contracting stages, through more focused clarification requests, standardisation of recurrent technical interpretations and early preparation of contracting;
- providing periodic information on the status of the evaluation process, such as interim communications or progress updates, allowing beneficiaries to plan more realistically;
- early clarification of recurrent technical aspects within a structured framework, through the use and consolidation of existing tools, such as FAQ sections and help-desk mechanisms.

Such measures can contribute to increasing predictability for beneficiaries, improving planning and maintaining the technological relevance of projects, without affecting the rigour of the evaluation process.

341. R3. Accelerating implementation through differentiated support, according to beneficiaries' digital maturity

It is recommended to maintain and consolidate a differentiated approach to project implementation, adapted to the actual level of digital maturity and administrative capacity of beneficiaries, namely SMEs and local public administrations. Such an approach can reduce procedural bottlenecks and delays generated by the gaps between administrative requirements and actual implementation capacity.

A. Funding applicants undertaking their first digital investment, both SMEs and local public administrations, require more intensive procedural support, focused on clarification and practical guidance, including through:

- clarifications during the implementation phase, with a focus on administrative requirements, reporting flows and the correlation between technical specifications and project objectives;
- the use of standardised examples for recurrent requirements, such as indicative document structures, examples of good practice and step-by-step explanations;
- information and training sessions focused on the implementation of IT projects, the relationship with providers, typical risks and progress reporting;

- for future calls, ex ante guidance tools to support understanding of the requirements set out in the guidelines, such as explanatory notes, digital maturity self-assessment grids and examples of typical projects, as well as a realistic assessment of internal implementation capacity.

B. Funding applicants with a higher level of digital maturity may receive support primarily oriented towards implementation quality and the sustainability of solutions, through:

- monitoring and technical dialogue focused on the use of solutions, their integration into organisational processes and interoperability prospects;
- advanced thematic sessions, such as workshops and peer-learning activities, on interoperability, modular architectures, security and the evolution of digital solutions;
- controlled flexibility in the interpretation of technical solutions, where the objectives are achieved and the impact is demonstrable.

342. R4. Facilitating learning and exchange of experience among beneficiaries

RDA Centre should facilitate the exchange of experience among Priority 2 beneficiaries, by disseminating lessons learned and examples of projects with visible operational results.

Examples of support measures include:

- exchange of experience among beneficiaries, both SMEs and local public administrations, including dedicated thematic sessions focused on lessons learned from project implementation, the effective use of digital solutions, recurrent difficulties and practical solutions identified;
- dissemination of concrete examples of projects that have generated visible operational results, such as reduced processing times, integration of internal workflows and effective use by staff and citizens, beyond formal compliance;
- facilitation of informative dialogue between beneficiaries and IT providers on recurrent topics such as solution interoperability, maintenance, scalability and the adaptation of technologies over time, with a view to supporting better-informed technical decisions.

Recommendations for the Next Programming Period (post-2027)

343. R5. Orienting/directing funding guidelines towards the intended results in use

It is recommended that funding guidelines for digitalisation projects combine the definition of a minimum set of technical specifications with a clear orientation towards the intended results in use, and less towards the exhaustive description of specific technologies.

This approach allows the relevance of solutions to be maintained in a context of rapid technological change and focuses the evaluation on functional value and effective use.

In practice, applicants should define the essential technical requirements needed to ensure the feasibility, security and interoperability of the solutions, together with the operational problem addressed and the expected results in use, such as reduced processing times, increased use of digital services and data exchange between systems.

344. R6. Introducing digital maturity screening for future calls

It is recommended to introduce a mechanism for screening beneficiaries' digital maturity, to be used as an ex ante guidance tool for applicants and for calibrating the type of call and associated requirements.

Digital maturity screening could be carried out before project submission, either as a standardised self-assessment tool or through an indicative questionnaire launched by ARD Centre, with an informative role and aimed at guiding potential beneficiaries.

The tool should be non-elimatory and used exclusively to guide applicants towards the appropriate type of call and level of complexity, depending on their actual implementation capacity and existing stage of digitalisation.

The analysis of digital maturity could cover a limited set of key dimensions, such as:

- the existing level of digitalisation of internal processes;
- internal capacity to manage IT projects;
- the degree of use of existing digital solutions;
- the capacity to integrate, maintain and ensure the sustainability of solutions.

The results of the screening would form the basis for differentiating funding calls, without introducing additional barriers to access.

345. R7. Differentiated calls according to beneficiaries' level of digital maturity

Based on the results of the digital maturity screening, it is recommended to structure future funding calls according to the beneficiaries' level of digital maturity, with requirements, procedures and criteria adapted to their actual implementation capacity.

Indicatively, two levels of calls may be considered:

- **Level 1 – Basic and operational digitalisation:** projects involving the automation of internal workflows, the implementation of ERP/CRM systems, electronic archiving and the digitalisation of administrative processes, with simplified technical requirements and documentation, and an emphasis on applicability and effective use.
- **Level 2 – Advanced digital transformation:** projects targeting extended interoperability, data analysis, integration of existing solutions and advanced technologies, such as AI, with an emphasis on integration, scalability and medium-term sustainability.

This approach would support a gradual and coherent evolution of beneficiaries and would increase implementation efficiency, through better alignment between the complexity of projects and beneficiaries' actual implementation capacity.

For Level 1 calls, it is recommended to use simplified evaluation procedures, including calls with continuous evaluation or a "first submitted – first evaluated" approach, while respecting eligibility criteria and minimum quality standards. Such differentiation can contribute to:

- reducing the duration of evaluation and contracting processes;
- increasing predictability for beneficiaries;
- enabling projects to start more quickly and reducing the risk of technological obsolescence;
- maintaining the rigour of the selection process through clear applicability criteria.

346. R8. Strengthening the coherence of requirements in the guidelines during the drafting stage

It is recommended to use mechanisms that support a consistent understanding and coherent application of requirements by potential beneficiaries during the drafting of the guidelines and before their launch for public consultation.

The recommendation concerns the testing and calibration of the wording of requirements in the guidelines, in order to avoid divergent interpretations or the need for subsequent “translations” during the project preparation and implementation phases. It is relevant to clarify the key concepts used in the guidelines, such as project complexity, equivalence of solutions and the expected level of technical detail, namely the minimum technical specifications.

In practice, this approach can be supported through:

- open thematic sessions of a general and informative nature, accessible to interested actors, including beneficiaries, consultants and IT providers, focused exclusively on explaining the logic and requirements of the guidelines before the public consultation stage;
- explanatory notes and indicative examples, without normative character, regarding the formulation of requirements;
- examples of projects, used exclusively to explain the expected level of detail in the documentation.

The approach does not involve changing eligibility rules, does not refer to specific technological solutions and strictly respects the principle of technological neutrality, contributing to improving the quality of submitted projects and reducing the volume of clarification requests in the subsequent evaluation and implementation stages.