Executive Summary

The adoption of the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) approach in the Danube Delta was motivated by the unique specificities of the region, both ecologically and socio-economically.

The ITI DD mechanism is structured on 15 actions corresponding to the six development priorities and responds to a set of critical challenges identified at ITI level.

**According to the evaluation results, the**objectives, actions and interventions implemented in the Danube Delta ITI area continue to be largely relevant to the current socio-economic problems of the region, as well as to the needs identified in the Integrated Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Danube Delta. The strategic directions set by the SIDDDD remain **valid and priority**, requiring **continuity and consolidation** to reduce structural gaps and support the sustainable development of the Danube Delta.

In financial terms, the 2021–2027 allocation is significantly **lower than in the previous period** in a context of **increased needs stemming also** from the effects of the war in Ukraine.

The current progress of implementation under the Danube Delta ITI is **moderate,** with a **contraction of only 24.8% of the total available allocation.** Only 19 contracted projects relate to the ITI DD area, mainly phased projects. The overall degree of contracting varies significantly between priorities and specific objectives. For example, for SO5.1 the degree of contracting is 54%, while for SO5.2 it is only 12%. At the same time, calls for important priorities such as P1 and P4 have not yet been launched, affecting the pace of progress of the entire mechanism.

The implementation of interventions in the Danube Delta ITI area is affected by insufficient financial, human and technical resources, despite institutional progress and support provided by the ITI DD IDA. The low administrative capacity of many ATUs, coupled with limited digitalisation and complex bureaucratic processes, makes it difficult to access funding and implement projects.

Recurrent problems in public procurement, such as delays and financial corrections, contribute to a low level of efficiency in the implementation of investments.

In order to improve the quality of implementation of the South-East Regional Programme (SERP) in the Danube Delta ITI area, a number of **structural and operational measures** are needed, aimed both at strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries and at streamlining the management and evaluation processes.

1. The program has a high relevance to the Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy Danube Delta being the main source of funding. The programme adapted over time to the financing needs – covering needs that could not be financed in the previous period. Complex projects with regional impact have been included in the PRSE alongside projects addressing more specific local needs. The territorial challenge remains effective implementation with limited capacity at ATU level. The programme can address both funding and benefits by leveraging opportunities offered by new EU priorities such as the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform. Relevant projects can provide impetus for RDI activity in the region. The South-East region benefits from a **unique geostrategic position**, being the gateway to the Black Sea and the connecting point between Eastern and European markets. The Danube Delta, as part of the region, offers unique opportunities in the **bioeconomy, ecological research and nature-based solutions** relevant to the green transition supported by STEP. Moreover, the Region already has defined **smart specialisation niches** – such as:

* Renewable energy (offshore/onshore wind, solar),
* Green technologies for sustainable agriculture and tourism,
* Digitalisation applied in port logistics and agri-food value chains

The evaluation formulates recommendations specific to the Danube Delta ITI territory, consistent with the recommendations formulated for between the regional programme and the South-East region.

1. Supporting beneficiaries in the Danube Delta ITI for the timely preparation of projects for calls planned in 2025.
2. Creation of a body of project evaluators of the MA. Identification of potential project evaluators in the Danube Delta ITI territory
3. Systematic and structured monitoring of key projects planned for ITI DD in the preparation phase
   * ‘Integrated project to improve hydrological conditions, fish restocking and reproduction, renaturation, monitoring and protection in the Somova-Parcheș Lake Complex, and enshrine the concept of the Children’s Delta’ (Priority 2),
   * ITI project – investments for the public transport system adapted to the needs, current environmental requirements and passenger safety, in conjunction with the berthing infrastructure in the ITI DD area (Priority 4).

This approach implies a regular monitoring of the process, in stages or stages of maturity of projects, and clear responsibilities for progress in project preparation. Publication of the process, including the fulfilment of responsibilities in project preparation, can contribute to increasing the accountability of the entities involved and to the management of absorption and effectiveness scenarios by the end of the programme.

1. Integrate into the programme the two types of interventions whose opportunity was created by the RESTORE (Regulation (EU) 2024/3236) and STEP (Regulation (EU) 2024/795) regulations, and finance them through reallocations from specific objectives and actions with lower than estimated demand, possibly other complementary sources at the level of the region, which can amplify the impact. The initiative to harness the opportunities offered by strategic and emerging technologies, through the STEP Platform, must be addressed as a boost to RDI activities in the region, harnessing the potential of research institutes and universities, as well as unique natural resources of the region, such as the Danube Delta, biodiversity, green energy. At the level of the Danube Delta ITI, regional actors will mobilise existing resources to identify relevant STEP projects that best capitalise on territorial potential.
2. It is recommended to support the development of the capacity of applicants for funding and beneficiaries in the development and implementation of projects, especially, but not exclusively, of beneficiaries in small towns and rural areas. Support will cover:
   * Guiding beneficiaries to make the best use of the funding opportunity for skills development, integrated in investment projects, through recommendations on the most effective ways of learning, but also institutionalising learning and facilitating the transfer of knowledge between beneficiaries.
   * Guidance to beneficiaries on the use of cross-financing, ESF-type expenditure, important for the operationalisation of the supported infrastructures and the quality of the related services provided to citizens.
3. Providing information from the territory of the Danube Delta ITI on the need for simplification, the effectiveness of the current simplification measures and shortcomings, including on MYSMIS, simplified cost options, redundancies in the submission of information through the application for funding, reporting.
4. Introduce strict contractual clauses to ensure compliance with the implementation schedules, including deadlines for launching public procurement and penalties in case of undue delays.

The implementation of these improvements will contribute to a **more efficient management tailored to the specific needs of the Danube Delta ITI,** reducing the risks of delays, increasing the quality of projects and maximising the impact of investments in the territory.