Interreg Co-funded by the European Union

IPA Bulgaria – Serbia

OpenCBC

Project summary

Project: BGRS0700176 **OPEN, INCLUSIVE AND BUSINESS FRIENDLY SERVICES FOR STRONGER CROSS-BORDER COMMUNITIES**

Acronym: OpenCBC

Start date: 02/07/2026

Duration: 18 месеца

Lead partner: National Alliance for Local Economic Development (NALED), Serbia
Partners:
Institute for Market Economies, Bulgaria
City of Leskovac, Serbia
Kyustendil Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Bulgaria

THE PROJECT'S OVERALL OBJECTIVE is to enhance inclusive and sustainable growth in the Bulgaria–Serbia cross-border region by improving accessibility, quality, efficiency, and transparency of services of general interest (SGI) that support entrepreneurship and local economic development, while fostering citizen participation and cross-border cooperation. By introducing tested regional standards and innovative SGI services, the project will strengthen the business environment, create opportunities for cross-border cooperation, and make the region more attractive for citizens and investors.

The project capitalises on the Business Friendly Certification South East Europe (BFC SEE), a unique regional standard created by NALED and applied in more than 100 municipalities across the Western Balkans and Croatia. BFC SEE offers clear, internationally recognized criteria for improving local governance, attracting investment, and strengthening accountability. Its integration into the cross-border area will provide pilot municipalities with a proven methodology, aligned with EU standards, and embedded in the CORE Partnership of over 20 institutions across the region.

KEY OUTPUTS include:

- Assessment of readiness for BFC SEE in Bulgaria, with recommendations for piloting standards in the CBC region.
- Baseline Assessments and Business-Friendly Environment Profiles for selected Serbian and Bulgarian municipalities, presenting socio-economic indicators, investment opportunities, potentials for cross-border cooperation and actions to strengthen youth and women's role in local development.
- Interactive socio-economic data tool – interactive map covering the CBC area, enabling evidence-based policymaking and transparent information for citizens, businesses, and investors.
- Pilot digital services: a digital chatbot in Leskovac offering entrepreneurship and municipal service support, and a Business+ Academy platform in Kyustendil providing digital training and networking for young and women entrepreneurs.

- Cross-Border Business-Friendly Governance Platform, an institutionalized platform bringing together municipalities, businesses, CSOs, and academia for structured dialogue and cooperation.

MAIN BENEFICIARIES include citizens (youth, women, vulnerable groups) who gain improved access to training and entrepreneurship support; businesses and investors with transparent access to data and stronger cooperation with municipalities; and local governments who receive methodologies and digital tools to improve competitiveness, services, and cross-border integration.

The cross-border approach is essential: only by harmonizing standards, pooling data, and jointly piloting SGI services can the region overcome fragmented local markets and attract sustainable investment. Serbian and Bulgarian partners bring complementary strengths – NALED as BFC SEE accreditation body and regional leader in service innovation, IME with strong expertise in economic policy and digital data tools, Kyustendil Chamber of Commerce ensuring private sector mobilization, and the City of Leskovac offering hands-on experience as a certified BFC municipality. Together, they will create models that are credible, replicable, and sustainable, extending beyond the project area through the CORE Partnership.

The project introduces several innovations: applying BFC SEE methodology in Bulgaria, integrating certification standards with digital open-data tools, piloting digital SGI services that deliver tangible benefits for entrepreneurs and citizens, and institutionalizing cross-border business platform. In doing so, it will transform the Bulgaria–Serbia border region into a more connected, transparent, and investment-friendly area, with results transferable across Southeast Europe.

Project BGRS0700176 „Open, Inclusive and Business Friendly Services for Stronger Cross-Border Communities“ is financed by the European Union through the Interreg VI-A IPA Bulgaria–Serbia Programme 2021–2027, Subsidy Contract No. RD-02-29-405/02.07.2026.