Cohesion Policy is the EU’s main investment policy, with a budget of €351.8 billion. It is also the bloc’s second largest policy in terms of funding, after agriculture.

In the past 30 years, Cohesion Policy has funded infrastructure around Europe, supported the economy of the South during the economic crisis and boosted economic development and job growth with an eye to innovation and competitiveness.

It was also one of the main tools for the integration of the new member states, especially after the 2004 enlargement, and the convergence of the poorest regions – mainly of the South – with the EU average.

In this Special Report, EURACTIV’s network presents some of the flagship projects around the EU that have vastly improved the lives of the citizens.
Tempi tunnels: A game changer for road safety in Greece

Schools open to all? Slovakia uses EU funds to include Roma children

Berlin course trains teachers to understand young digital natives

Martian olives, courtesy of Italian project and EU cash

EU-funded eco market becomes symbol of circular economy in Brussels

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EU-funded eco market becomes symbol of circular economy in Brussels
Clean-up squads, co-financed with European funds, stepped up their efforts in recent weeks in the Mar Menor region in southeast Spain, to remove dead algae and other waste from the shoreline of Europe’s largest saltwater lagoon.

Nearly 3,000 cubic metres of waste have been removed so far this year, by teams that are working around the clock on the lagoon’s shoreline. Their efforts, largely financed by ERDF [European Regional Development] funds, have this month focused on the region between Estrella de Mar, Los Urrutias and Los Nietos localities.

FOR THIRD CONSECUTIVE YEAR

“This is the third year for this cleaning and ecological quality maintenance service for natural spaces of the Mar Menor and its surrounding areas,” said director general of environment and Mar Menor, Antonio Luengo.

These teams, which started working in the summer of 2016, are showing their “effectiveness”, said Luengo, adding that there have been “improvements”.

Those improvements include the service being functional throughout the year and the introduction of light machinery to “triple” the efficiency of the cleaning efforts.

On 16 May, Luengo was present at Los Urrutias beach during the testing of one of these models, which weighs 1.2 kilograms and is very versatile, which can be used for removing algae from the shore as well as for combing the beaches.

The idea is to mitigate the impact of garbage, oil spills, decomposing plant debris and other elements that have a negative influence on the environmental quality of Mar Menor and other habitats that are of Community interest.

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There is also a tourism factor. Mar Menor, with a surface area of 180 square kilometres, is separated from the Mediterranean Sea by a sandbar – 22 km long and 100-800 metres wide –, known as La Manga (sleeve) del Mar Menor.

The clean-up work is done manually on the ground and includes a light machinery “dumper” that speeds up the collection of algae along the shore, through which they seek to “progressively reduce the deposition of organic matter in Mar Menor”, Luengo explained.

**SUPERVISION**

The work is supervised daily by a biologist, who advises on habitats and species conservation, and on the use of most appropriate techniques for carrying out the cleaning efforts.

Moreover, the expert also looks into the possible presence of nesting activities of protected birds in the cleaning zone, such as stilts; and fish species of interest, such as the Spanish Toothcarp, in danger of extinction. In these cases, the work is planned in phases in order not to affect these species.

Complementing the work on land, a boat goes around Mar Menor collecting garbage floating on water, such as plastics, mattresses, paper and cardboard, wood and debris from pieces of catamaran vessels that are adrift in the water.

**‘NEITHER SUFFICIENT NOR EFFECTIVE’, ACCORDING TO RESIDENTS**

But the efforts, although welcome, have been criticised for being insufficient to counter the “severe deterioration” of the lagoon, according to social platform Pacto por el Mar Menor (Pact for Mar Menor).

The platform is made up of people as well as social, professional, cultural, environmental and union organisations.

On 18 May, the Pacto por el Mar Menor, Cofradía de Pescadores de San Pedro del Pinatar (Fishermen’s Association of San Pedro del Pinatar), the Asociación de Naturalistas del Sureste (Association of Naturalists of the Southeast), the Federación de Asociaciones de Vecinos, Consumidores y Usuarios de Cartagena y Comarca (Federation Neighborhood Associations, Users and Consumers of Cartagena and Shire) and Ecologistas en Acción (Ecologists in Action) warned the European Union that measures taken by the administration in Murcia were “neither sufficient nor effective”.

The platform reiterated in a statement that it dealt with “mere advertisements devoid of content”.

Pacto por el Mar Menor claimed that millions of euros, much of it from the EU, were being spent on actions not aimed at environmental recovery, citing investment in jetties, infrastructure and promotion of tourism.

Moreover, it alerted Brussels that some of the measures adopted were harmful, such as the use of a Watermaster Dredger that damaged “some of the rare prairies of (algae) Cymodocea nodosa”.

The platform concluded by calling for greater control of European funds dedicated to the recovery of the lagoon.

Pacto por el Mar Menor revealed that a complaint by the Murcia public prosecutor’s office against politicians, officials and agricultural entrepreneurs identified as those “responsible for the disaster” in Mar Menor, was being examined at a local court.
Over the past decade, Katowice – capital of Poland’s Silesia region – has transformed from a coal and steel city into a booming centre of business and culture. Its Culture Zone hosts major European and international music, cultural and business events and boasts unique architectural pearls.

A stroll around the Zone offers plenty of top-notch amusement: from jazz and electro music to an unexpected combination of a symphony orchestra with, say, Czech folk singer Jaromír Nohavica at the breathtaking Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra (NOSPR) building.

Or you can drop by the underground Silesian Museum, which offers exhibitions of modern and contemporary art.

If you are a businessman, politician or a journalist, you will have heard of the European Economic Congress (EEC), now ten years old, which transforms Katowice into a political and business capital of Europe once a year.

Then there is the international climate summit COP24, which takes place this winter. Some find it paradoxical that this major environmental fête should be held for the fourth time in a country infamous for its smog levels and attachment to coal, not to mention that Katowice itself has been habitually associated with smokestacks rather than green transition.

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The cost of the zone was €250 million, with the European Union’s European Regional Development Fund providing more than 50% of the amount.

CULTURE ZONE – A SYMBOL OF SMART TRANSFORMATION

However, one of the aims of organising all those events here – in the heart of Silesia – is to alter this image and present Katowice as a model for a smart, green transformation.

Culture Zone, a modern conference and culture district fused with green areas (and a huge parking lot), is supposed to be the perfect showcase for this change, with the Spodek Sport and Show Arena, a real architectural pearl.

Spodek leads to the International Congress Centre, whose lawn-covered roof is a favourite photo venue for newlyweds, and to a stunning seat of the new Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra (NOSPR), and the underground Silesian Museum describing the region’s mining history.

Those buildings and institutions “influence the city’s recognisability, and as a result, they draw new investors, inhabitants, as well as guests that enjoy the Zone as a venue where they can rest and taste the culture,” Marcin Krupa, the mayor of Katowice, told EURACTIV.pl.

BEYOND THE CULTURE ZONE AND INTO THE SMOG

However, the situation becomes less ideal when seen in a broader context.

While Katowice has been transformed beyond recognition, its levels of smog remain extremely high. It is among the 50 most polluted European cities, occupying 47th position, according to this year’s WHO ranking.

Six cities in the region are on the infamous WHO pollution list (and 36 of the 50 most polluted European cities are in Poland).

Katowice still lacks effective anti-smog regulation (a regional resolution was accepted last year, to no effect so far). But, indeed, the city is very green, at least on the surface – with over 50% of green areas within its limits.

Another problem is the depopulation of the city, including its centre. That means that the Culture Zone is primarily a showcase for visitors from other cities and abroad.

In between festivals, concerts and events like the European Economic Congress or international environmental conference COP24, this heart of Silesia becomes deserted.

NOSPR concerts are sold out half a year in advance. But good local restaurants are almost empty when there are no concerts. Local people simply don’t identify with the Culture Zone as their heart of the town. And it doesn’t keep them in the city, whose population has now declined to fewer than 300,000.

The area surrounding the Zone is also deserted, strewn with thousands of abandoned houses, many of them unrenovated despite their valuable modernist architecture.

A casual stroll around the downtown in the evening, beyond the animated Mariacka street and its nightlife, reveals a pervasive emptiness.

Katowice has always been an immigrant city, where people came to work in coal mines. There is little to keep them here now, but Marcin Krupa says that city hall is working hard to reverse these negative trends and is putting in place a policy of renovating old, empty buildings and transferring them to people.

But a different kind of debate is now raging among the city’s inhabitants, activists and local authorities, focusing on the plan for a new 5-hectare housing estate to be built behind the Silesian Museum with buildings of 12 and 18 stories.

According to the activists and some local politicians, it will cover up the Culture Zone and further separate it from the rest of the city.

“Katowice is a playground for developers,” commented Jaroslaw Makowski, a regional councillor.

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD

The Culture Zone also has one Achilles’ heel of its own. The walls of the Silesian Museum are leaking. The problem was revealed in 2013 but has still not been solved by the construction company.

There’s an ongoing court case against the firm, which says today’s trouble is the result of the Museum’s management. The museum project cost more than €62 million, almost 70% of which came from the European Regional Development Fund.

The blame game will certainly feature in November’s regional elections.

Filip Springer, a Polish writer who travels around the country explaining and assessing Polish architecture, summed up the Culture Zone aptly:

“Contrary to the plans of the city authorities, they didn’t manage to transform this post-coal mine area into a new town centre. What has been created is a park of good architecture isolated from the downtown by expressways that will not live the life of the city”.

Little has changed since he wrote those words in ‘Księga zachwytów’ (‘A Book of Delights’) published in early 2016. It is up to the entrepreneurial municipal authorities now to think of how to make the city’s heart beat along with the rest of Katowice.
Sofia metro lessons: Benefits and problems with the way EU funds are spent

By Petar Karaboev | Dnevnik.bg

In 14 years, Sofia’s metro project has taken up nearly €1 billion from EU funds. It was declared “infrastructure project of the last decade” in Bulgaria. Due to be completed in less than two years, it should serve around 1.2 million people a day. EURACTIV’s media partner Dnevnik reports.

While it showcases the benefits of EU membership, the metro project also reveals shortcomings in how the Bulgarian authorities work with EU funds. And this is particularly important at a time when negotiations on the EU’s new long-term financing are starting, and the initial budget proposal aims to cut regional funding.

Planning began already under communist rule in the 1960s. In the mid-1970s, the first project was developed and it was later replicated in today’s scheme of the three metro lines.

In 1998, only three years after Bulgaria applied for EU membership, the first 6.5 km stretch was opened. Eleven years later, the first line spanned the entire city.

Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007 and the pace rapidly picked up. In July that year, a tender for the second line of 11 stations was launched, a year later

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construction began and in August 2012 it became operational.

The third line with 16 stations is currently being built and should be ready by 2020. In contrast to the first line that uses metros produced in 1990 by the former USSR, the third line will have Siemens trains and an autonomous traffic option.

Grants and funding came from the EU's Cohesion Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, the Operational Program “Environment”, the Operational Program on Transport and Transport Infrastructure. Loans were provided by the European Investment Bank.

Positive effects are clearly visible in downtown Sofia. More than 300,000 people take the subway daily, which means less traffic on the streets and greenhouse gas savings of around 75,000 tons, according to the Sofia Municipality.

Ivan Velkov, the deputy speaker of the Sofia municipal council, who is also a consultant and former manager of Colliers International, said “the existing and future metro stations have become a huge factor when choosing a home, and entire neighbourhoods and areas have suddenly acquired a pragmatic and attractive perspective”.

“New buildings are being built but their residents are changing too – changing their stereotypes, habits. And if you get on the subway in the morning or evening rush hours, the city looks... more busy and dynamic.”

The commuters interviewed by Dnevnik said they can now move much faster around the city and no longer use their private cars to go to the city centre.

But they also complain that, while there are more than 20 metro stations, only two have adjacent public car parking spaces, in a city where some 15,000 new cars are registered every month and above-ground public transport is not particularly fast or reliable.

Emilia K., a Sofia citizen, said she spends one-third of the time travelling to work on the metro, but the other two-thirds waiting for or travelling by bus. The distance is only 10 km and takes 15-20 minutes by car, outside the daily rush hours. By metro and public transport in the evening, it takes a full 45 minutes.

And this, according to Emilia, shows that the metro project, for all the EU funds spent on it, has failed to provide smart and multifaceted logistics for the city's population.

“The accelerated construction of the Sofia subway in recent years can definitely be mentioned as a good example of the EU funds utilisation in Bulgaria and of the benefits of our accession in general,” said Georgi Stefanov, an expert with World Wildlife Fund Bulgaria.

“Undoubtedly, this enormous, long-standing, costly project has environmental, transport, social and mobility benefits.

“But at the same time, there is cause for concern. It’s as if we had forgotten the fundamental and most important thing – that in fact European public funds should be used with the purpose to attract other investments that diversify the investment climate in the member states, improve economic conditions and protect the nature,” he adds.

Stefanov is concerned that “after 10 years of EU membership, there is no even distribution of these funds in Bulgaria and they definitely do not lead to a complete improvement of the economic condition of all regions, especially the ones most in need. In fact, we have witnessed the exact opposite trend.”

He says that huge funds from two programming periods have been mastered or planned “but – as was the case with the Sofia subway – at the expense of other publicly and EU funded projects of all types”.

Stefanov points out that hundreds of millions of euros had previously been planned for modernising rail transport across the country and helping to improve the quality of life of all people in all regions. Instead, they went into the metro construction.

“The capital seems to be closer to Europe than the lagging parts of Bulgaria.”

While he complained that Bulgaria was getting accustomed to the notion that EU funds have become “the only opportunity for the development of our country”, Ivan Velkov said “European funds, with European criteria and rules – even when there are problems with different speeds of their utilisation – lead to European habits and relationships.”
Since 2009, the Intégrathlon has challenged preconceived ideas about disabilities with sports events organised in five towns in Seine-Saint-Denis. EURACTIV.fr went to Tremblay-en-France, one of the cities at the heart of this year’s project.

“It’s time for the 3.6 km hike,” announced the organiser of the event on 5 May. Gathered in front of the Jean Guimier sports centre in Tremblay-en-France (Seine-Saint-Denis), the hikers got ready. Members of the local hiking club were joined by people with disabilities under the framework of the Intégrathlon for the hike.

Spread over five days, the event, which started in 2009, brings together disabled and non-disabled through sport. Wheelchair handball, tennis, boxing, golf and Zumba: over fifty different activities are offered to the public in five towns in Seine-Saint-Denis: Villepinte, Sevran, Le Blanc-Mesnil, Aulnay-sous-Bois and Tremblay-en-France.

With its rising success, the Intégrathlon has increased the number of its partners and gained the support of the EU. The European Social Fund has allocated €92,000 to the project in 2016 and 2017. These funds were allocated to the region under priority axis 4 of the regional operational program 2014-2020, namely “promoting inclusion”.

RAISING AWARENESS OF OTHER SPORTS

“The Intégrathlon is a way to bring disabled and able-bodied together by including both in each other’s experiences, it goes both ways,” said the deputy mayor of Tremblay-en-
France responsible for sport, Patrick Martin.

Not far from the hike’s starting point, those with or without disabilities can participate in couple cycling workshops and introductory courses to rock-climbing, gymnastics and archery.

In the gymnasium, it’s time for wheelchair football. Two students, Scott and Sher, learned how to use a wheelchair. “In the beginning, it’s complicated to use but you get used to it, and to its speed, which I enjoyed,” one of them said.

In the dojo [a traditional Japanese space for martial marts], children discover and test sports practices specific for people with disabilities, such as judo for the blind, by practising blindfolded.

Awareness starts at a young age, so the first three days of the Intégrathlon target school children from primary and secondary schools, while it is open to the general public on the last two days.

In the dojo, people learn judo blindfolded.

Including handicapped people all year round

Last year 2,300 families and 2,500 school children (who came with their schools) took part in the event.

As its success grew, the aim of the project has also grown to include the after-Integra and the possibility of sports associations including people with disabilities all year round.

“Even if there has been progress, France is still behind on the accessibility of premises,” said Farid, 37, who has been playing wheelchair football since the age 12.

If for some sports clubs the Intégrathlon is an exception, “other associations from the five towns have risen to the challenge of including disabled people all the time,” said Martin, the deputy mayor.

For example, rock-climbing instructor Eric Chambrieu teaches a group with disabilities every fortnight. Although at the start “people coming to rock-climb kept their distance, nowadays they come to say hello and a real contact has been established”.

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Pro fit is not the only reason to start a business. There are enterprises in Europe whose aim is to help other people, usually the less fortunate ones, with their career.

These so-called social enterprises provide jobs for long-term unemployed, disabled or otherwise disadvantaged people such as asylum seekers or people released from prison. Many of those enterprises rely on EU funding, particularly the European Social Fund.

There are 220 social enterprises registered in the Czech Republic. One of them is Semitam, a company providing cleaning services in the town of Havlíčkův Brod, southeast of the capital Prague.

“Our customers often don’t even know that we are a social enterprise,” said Martina Kadlecová, the founder of the company.

Semitam provides jobs especially for people with health disabilities and mental disorders. “For example, we employ a boy who cannot speak,” said Kadlecová.

Released prisoners deserve change

Her project first focused on former convicts because she had worked as a social pedagogue in a women’s prison before.

“Prison is a place where people have to follow strict rules, unwritten laws and restrictions, but after the release, there is no continuity. So I got the idea to provide an opportunity to those who have decided to change

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Czech social entrepreneur offers disadvantaged people a chance

By Claire Guyot | EURACTIV.fr / translated by Freya Kirk

Two persons shake hands. [Gerarit/Pixabay]
and devote their strength to work,” explained Kadlecová.

She started the business in 2011 and a few months later successfully applied for financial support from the European Social Fund.

“In the beginning, I had to learn how to effectively manage a business because with our employees it is not easy at all,” said Kadlecová.

According to her, EU funding is a great possibility to get financing for such projects. She participated in training courses and joined various platforms grouping social enterprises to learn as much as she could.

“However, I encountered some problems while reporting certain formalities.”

The labour and welfare ministry made different demands to the employment office and some conditions have changed over time. But it has worked out, and Semitam has been selected as an example of good practice.

Now the company is preparing for another project to diversify its portfolio – freeze-drying. “With this modern technology, we would process the products of local growers,” said Kadlecová.

According to the labour and welfare ministry, more than 120 new social enterprises were supported during the 2007 – 2013 programming period and more than €23 million was allocated to them.

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Only a handful of applicants were successful

In the next period, 2014-2020, more than 200 social enterprises were interested in the subsidy but only a handful succeeded in their applications and were granted subsidies.

There were several reasons for the failures. “The applicants submitted intentions that did not take into account all aspects of social entrepreneurship. Some of them were only socially oriented, or they had a primarily economic motivation,” said the labour and welfare ministry.

Subsidies were therefore allocated only to those that combined a social dimension with competitiveness and sustainability.
The EU-financed restoration of Alba Carolina Citadel has already transformed the city of Alba Iulia into one of Romania’s top tourist attractions. But the ambitions of the administrators of the city of 70,000 in central Romania have not stopped there.

In the spring of 2003, Alba Iulia was preparing to host its first City Day in the citadel’s ditches, which were opened to the public. The walls of the 18th-century Vauban-style fortress had been largely ignored and the only people who ventured inside the fortifications were daring children and the soldiers who had their barracks close by.

So, the event on 31 May 2003, marked by horse parades, concerts and a beer festival was also a moment of renaissance for the 300-year old citadel.

Ten years later, the fortress was almost completely restored with funds from the EU’s Regional Operational Programme. But the administrators of Alba Iulia were just getting the hang of using European funds and did not intend to stop at restoring only their city’s historical centre.

For Alba Iulia, 1 January 2007, marked the start of one of the best periods in its 2,000-year history. While for many local communities, Romania’s accession to the EU brought depopulation, due to migration, and even a reduced appetite for investment, the population of Alba Iulia grew and so did investments.

Alba Iulia is a champion of using EU financing for development.

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“Alba Iulia is the city that attracted the most European funds in the whole of Romania. More than €3,000 for each resident, compared with the Romanian average of 1,000 euro. We have received €200 million from the European Commission for the city alone, not for the whole county,” says the mayor, Mircea Hava.

Around a third of the total of €200 million was used for 20 projects related to the fortress restoration and tourist facilities, but the local government used regional development funding to build roads, bicycle tracks, landscaping projects or new tourist attractions.

“I did not think that I would enjoy [Alba Iulia] that much. There are so many things to do and they have restored it wonderfully,” said 24-year old Iulia Nicut, who recently spent a few days of her vacation in the city.

But it’s not only the tourists who enjoy the renewal of Alba Iulia. Encouraged by the development, a 59-year old Romanian woman, who had left the country about three decades ago, has chosen to buy land for building a house, while keeping the apartment she owns in Alba Iulia, where she has spent her childhood years.

The restored fortress became an important tourist attraction, but the accompanying infrastructure investments had also benefitted. From around 60,000 inhabitants in the 2000s, Alba Iulia’s population reached 74,000 in 2017.

The number of lodging units has risen to keep up with the higher number of tourists, while the interest of foreign students in the University of Alba Iulia courses is also increasing. The “1 Decembrie 1918” University has a budget of €1.5 million for the Erasmus+ program in the 2015-2018 period.

Alba Iulia has held a very important role in the history of Romania. Some 2,000 years ago, the Romans built a large castrum [military camp] in what is today Alba Iulia. Apulum was the largest city in the Dacia province and the castrum was the seat of the XIII Gemina Legion, which guarded the mountains where the gold was extracted and watched over the roads used to transport it to Rome.

During the Middle Ages, Alba Iulia was the capital of the Principality of Transylvania and it also played a role in the union of the three great Romanian principalities under Michael the Brave.

Later on, the Great Union of Romania was marked by the Alba Iulia Resolution on 1 December 1918. Four years later, Ferdinand of Romania and Queen Marie were symbolically crowned in front of the Coronation Cathedral – built inside the walls of the citadel – as monarchs of unified Romania.

While Romania is celebrating its Centenary in 2018, Alba Iulia is eyeing the future, aspiring to become Romania’s first smart city. Tens of companies invested more than one million euros in projects such as smart lighting, solutions for civic activism, digital education, WiFi hotspots, a medical hotline or a virtual tour of the Citadel.

“A smart city is made by people and not by technology and it is more about how to solve people’s problems by properly using technology. A city in which technology works safely, easily and in a transparent manner makes people’s life much easier and enjoyable,” Alba Iulia city manager, Nicolaie Moldovan, told Mediafax news agency in a recent interview.

“We know that, in order to become a smart city, Alba Iulia needs to invest a few hundred million euros in the infrastructure, in 10 to 15 years, but also needs legislation and programs to support smart city development, well-trained workforce (...) and a good collaboration with utilities, telecoms, transport or safety companies,” Moldovan also said.

In that respect, Alba Iulia counts on EU funding again. “I hope the next multiannual financial framework of the EU and the national government will allow cities to get money for smart infrastructure,” said Moldovan, the city manager.

After the Centenary Year, Romania will take over the rotating EU Presidency in the first half of 2019. Alba Iulia will, once again, play a significant role, as it will be hosting some important meetings, according to Victor Negrescu, Minister Delegate for European Affairs. “Alba Iulia is a beloved city for Romanian people and it is normal to be included in the programme of Romania’s Presidency,” said Negrescu.

Incidentally, the European Commission’s Representative Office in Romania chose Alba Iulia to be the host of this year’s event held to mark Europe Day, 9 May. It was yet another sign of the European dimension of one of Romania’s most vibrant cities.
Tempi tunnels: A game changer for road safety in Greece

By Sofia Elanidou | EURACTIV.gr

What do the Alps and Mount Olympus have in common apart from snowy peaks? Since 2017, tunnels have carved through the rock, slashing journey times and improving road safety. Greece’s project took a long time to happen but EU funding ultimately made it all possible.

The completion of the Tempi project in April 2017, now the largest highway in the Balkans with its 3 twin tunnels, means the 503 km journey from Athens to Thessaloniki is 45-75 minutes shorter than before, meaning the trip can be made in just over four hours.

Its construction cost around €1.5 billion, with half the money coming from Structural and Cohesion Funds, which supported the project with a grant of €699 million.

EU co-financing applied to the construction of the Evangelismos – Skotina section (24.7 km), as well as the upgrade of the existing sections (204 km) of the PATHE axis through the Operational Programme ‘Improvement of Accessibility’ 2007-2013.

Delays cost human lives

Its completion resulted in a reduction of road accident dangers by 30% per year – this is about 50 accidents a year – in one specific area.

But obstacles to technical procedures and delays in public procurement mean the area witnessed a number of accidents, the blame for which has been laid squarely at the feet of administrative shortcomings.

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combined with human error.

A typical example is one of the 21 pupils from Makrochori, Imathia, who died in April 2003 while returning home from an excursion to Athens. In the afternoon of that day, the 43-year-old driver of a truck lost control, entered the oncoming motorway lane and collided with a bus between Thessaloniki and Larissa.

Another accident took place near Tempi in October 1999, when six PAOK football fans were killed when the driver of a bus carrying 77 people collided with a truck when trying to overtake it, leading to the bus overturning into a ditch.

**A NEW REALITY FOR THE HIGHWAY**

This is all in the past now and today’s reality is quite different. After the tunnel’s completion, no serious accident has occurred in the area and traffic jams that once caused significant delays have been eliminated, particularly in the summer months.

It has also had the knock-on effect on making the old scenic road an alternative route for visitors and tourists, who can take it in order to enjoy the beautiful vistas provided by the Pinios River, Mount Olympus and Mount Kissavos.

**EU CO-FINANCING CRUCIAL**

The Tempi project, which had been planned for years, was initially announced by former public works minister George Souflias in 2001, but the contractor was selected only five years later, in 2006. The contract was signed in mid-2007.

Work on the tunnel was expected to conclude in 2011 but the financial crisis in Greece hit companies and banks hard and led to repeated postponements until it was finally completed in April 2017.

This project – of unprecedented size and difficulty for Greece – was implemented through a concession contract (PPP) as part of the pan-European TEN-T network.

“Greece could not have completed these projects without the concession method, without co-financing,” George Souflias said, referring to the completion of the project.

At the inauguration of the project, Corina Crețu, European Commissioner for Regional Policy, underlined that “the opening of these tunnels was something that seemed impossible but became possible. This is a Herculean job, which you have achieved thanks to EU funding. I am also proud that Greece can show other countries the results of Cohesion Policy.”

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras also stressed that “we have proved and continue to prove that even in difficult times, serious work, awareness of the responsibility towards the country and the public, towards the public interest, can ultimately produce a positive and productive result.”

Greece is now focusing on the completion of the Thessaloniki metro, earmarked for sometime before the end of 2019, which Commissioner Crețu hopes to inaugurate before the end of her mandate.
Systemic segregation of Roma children in Slovakia’s pre-schools and primary education has been around – and barely addressed – for many years. The lack of efforts on their inclusion has been highlighted by both human rights NGOs and the European Commission.

But the Slovak education ministry has kicked off a new €30 million project, with the help of European funds, to change things and give hope to all disadvantaged children.

STRUGGLING WITH SEGREGATION

An estimated 400,000 Roma live in Slovakia, around 8% of the country’s population. A large part of them live in extremely poor conditions in so-called marginalised Roma communities, with very limited access to the standard education system.

A report carried out by Amnesty International last year concluded that Slovakia continues to fail to integrate pupils from marginalised communities, in particular the Roma, into the mainstream education process.

The report stated that “the discrimination and segregation of Roma in primary education remains widespread and the Slovak authorities are fundamentally failing to address them”.

The European Commission came to a similar conclusion. In 2015, the EU executive initiated infringement proceedings against Slovakia for breaching the prohibition of
The biggest obstacle preventing Romani children from quality education, according to Kamila Gunisova, the head of Amnesty’s local office, is the inaction of competent national authorities.

“Other factors such as insensitive diagnosis, attitudes of non-Roma parents and teaching staff, school attendance, could be easily resolved, if there had been any political will,” Gunisova told EURACTIV.

**BEYOND FORMAL SCHOOLING**

In 2016, the education ministry launched a project named “Schools Open to All” (SOA), using money from European funds, which should help solve the exclusion of Romani children from education opportunities.

For a period of four years, nearly 30€ million will be dedicated to the project. The vast majority – 85% – of the financing comes from the European funds, particularly the European social fund and the European Regional Development Fund.

An essential part of the national programme focuses on implementing measures for pre-school programmes, where all the troubles with segregation arise.

According to Vladimír Horváth from the Slovak government’s Office for the Roma communities, only 30% of Romani children in Slovakia are enrolled in kindergartens, in stark contrast to 90% of non-Roma children.

The main objective of the SOA project is to ensure that the largest possible number of Romani children have access to compulsory pre-school education. To help achieve this, the programme aims to create more than 500 new teaching assistant positions and professional staff.

In addition, the programme is primarily based on non-formal learning methods which should improve readiness for school among children from the socially disadvantaged environment. What often happens in practice is that Roma children are erroneously placed in special schools and classes for children with “mild mental disabilities”.

As a result, they receive lower-quality education and, consequently, it is even more difficult to break the vicious circle of poverty and marginalisation.

To date, a total of 50 kindergartens and 130 primary schools have been involved in the national project. Furthermore, 416 kids and 426 members of their families have participated in non-formal learning.

“Children go about their activities in an engaging and enjoyable way that develops their personality: they adopt better hygiene behaviour or learn to use the Slovak language properly,” said Edita Kovářová, a member of COA office responsible for non-formal education.

**LACK OF QUALIFIED TEACHERS**

An essential part of non-formal learning is to ensure the involvement of parents in the education process. This is particularly important for families from marginalised Roma communities, as these are often not concerned about how their children perform at school. But if they do, it may have an impact on the entire community.

“In almost all locations, this activity has been welcomed with great enthusiasm from the children’s parents. They adopted a new educational approach in order to motivate their entire community to look for appropriate training and education from a very early age,” Edita Kovářová added.

Schools that have joined the national programme also confirm that non-formal educational activities and new teaching assistants are very helpful.

“The greatest benefit of SOA is the fact that we could hire three teaching assistants, one social pedagogue and one educational psychologist who enhance and facilitate our work. An additional benefit is the all-day educational system,” Zuzana Lacková, the headmaster of the school in the village of Borša, told EURACTIV.

However, it is not an easy task to find enough qualified personnel in Slovakia.

“There is a shortage of special teachers and educational psychologists in the labour market. This is why some schools can count solely on social workers,” explained Peter Dolíhal, the SOA’s project manager.
Berlin, the borough of Mitte: A dozen people of mixed ages sit in a room full of computers and play Minecraft. The aim is to learn what the open source game can be used for. The participants are guided by an employee of the WeTeK training centre, who will show them how to use computer games for working with young people. EURACTIV.de reports.

The Minecraft-class is part of a project on media education for social educators offered by WeTeK, a Berlin-based project, with funding from the European Social Fund (ESF).

The ESF finances more than 600 projects on qualification, integration, culture and combating youth unemployment in Berlin. In the current ESF funding period (2014-2020), the Bundesland of Berlin has approximately €215 million at its disposal.

The media education at WeTeK aims to impart digital skills to child and youth carers. Anyone working in day-care centres, schools or with young people in assisted living must understand the generation of digital natives as well as how they use media. After all, it is difficult to teach children how to use digital media responsibly if one’s own technological knowledge is insufficient.

Computers and mobile phones can be used in many ways for creative work with children, especially in class: “Nowadays it is incredibly important to teach media skills to the children. But which parent sits down and says: today we will make a podcast. This is why we train our course

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participants,” explains Steffi Winkler, the coordinator of the media class.

But the project is about much more, she underlines: “The educators should also be able to teach the children things, for example how to make a good PowerPoint presentation or how to research information correctly; that there are more hits than the first three on Google.”

The project, therefore, offers a wide range of courses: from audio and video-editing software to courses on hate speech or the role models of girls on the net. How much media knowledge educators bring along often depends on age – and the discrepancies are large.

“Older educators and teachers often have to learn that computer games are not always bad, even shooting games. Younger people, on the other hand, know such things; they rather have to keep a critical eye on children's media consumption,” explains Gordon Schmid from the computer game addiction counselling service of Caritas in Berlin.

Media misuse and hyperconnectedness are important points in pedagogical work nowadays, he underlines. Today, 81 percent of ten to eleven-year-olds surf the Internet several times a week, according to the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI).

Educators are thus required to recognise unhealthy media behaviour and to counter it in due time.

“In the end, it is also about respect and understanding between carers and young people. For example, educators need to understand that computer games are important [to the youths] and that you can’t always just stop right in the middle but you first have to finish a round. You wouldn’t call the child off the pitch in the middle of a football match either. It’s about understanding the children's priorities,” Schmid believes.

The media education of WeTeK, therefore, teaches educators to use computer games and the Internet as a creative addition in their work with children and young people. Almost 50,000 lessons have been given since the start of the project in 2016, and more than 1,300 teachers have been trained free of charge.

The media project is financed in equal parts by the Bundesland of Berlin and the ESF. Project Manager Steffi Winkler recollects that submitting the applications for EU funding – which are feared because of their size and scope – was like writing a doctoral thesis, especially regarding the content, as the concept had to be presented very clearly.

However, the project would not have come about in the first place without the availability of EU funds, Winkler emphasizes.

This funding has enabled WeTeK to create a very important offer: “Teachers must know how to approach a child or a young person. You have to pick up where you can reach the child – and today, that's on the computer or mobile phone.”
Is there life on Mars? Maybe soon. What seems more like Hollywood sci-fi than genuine farming prospect could soon come to fruition, as an Italian project uses EU funding to grow plants in extremely hostile conditions. EURACTIV Italy reports.

The silver screen has broached the subject before, first in 1996’s ‘Growing Artichokes in Mimongo’, set in Africa, and then 2015’s blockbuster ‘The Martian’, where Matt Damon’s stranded astronaut-botanist tries to survive his unplanned stay on the Red Planet.

Perhaps it was the latter movie that inspired a new project that wants to cultivate olive trees on the very same planet.

The technology that creates micro-ecosystems was first patented by Enea (the National Agency for Technology, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development) and was developed in the Tripode Public-Private Laboratory. More progress was made thanks to the ISAAC Project, which was co-financed with more than €4.7 million from the European Horizon 2020 programme.

In the Italian project, cultivating olive trees on Mars could actually become possible thanks to a ‘microcosm’ that allows plants to grow in extreme and hostile environments. It was developed by Enea at a research centre near Naples.

Using the land, and not a solution of water and nutrients like in other space gardens, the system simulates the conditions of a field, but indoors, and allows people to grow potatoes, Continued on Page 23
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tomatoes, lettuce and basil and, for the first time in these conditions, even trees.

In fact, the system allows woody plants to grow in environments normally unsuitable for them, like airports, metro stations and shopping malls, but also extreme deserts and polar areas.

“Our ‘microcosms’ are true ecosystems, different from traditional greenhouses and growth chambers, and are able to faithfully replicate in the laboratory what happens naturally in a cultivated field,” explained Luigi d’Aquino, a member of the Enea team.

This is made possible by the use of two cultivation chambers: a lower one for the roots and an upper one for the stem and crown. Although independent, the two ‘rooms’ are linked to each other, mimicking the natural connection between a tree’s stem and roots.

Gaseous exchanges take place through the soil where the roots grow. The simulator used in the Enea project controls and manages plant growth through a hi-tech device that check humidity and temperature, while LED lights modulate the right levels of lighting.

The team’s results have already generated local media interest and although the curiosity and enthusiasm are justified, it will still take time to test the achievements of the ISAAC Project in ‘real’ conditions, i.e. in space and on Mars.

The conquest of Mars could be just over the horizon but ISAAC Project researchers will want to field-test their work on Terra-firma ahead of handing it over to an actual astronaut, meaning EU Cohesion Funds will also help Africa before shooting for the stars.
EU-funded eco market becomes symbol of circular economy in Brussels

By Beatriz Rios | EURACTIV.com

L’Abattoir, one of the biggest urban markets in Europe built in an old slaughterhouse, could well be seen as a symbol of the circular economy as it has become a source of income for the poor while promoting sustainable farming on its rooftop.

Every weekend, the Abattoirs of Cureghem buzz like a huge honeycomb, from early morning until late afternoon. The smells of flowers, herbs, spices, pickles, cheese, fresh fruits and vegetables are in the air while customers wander around scanning products.

The market is located in an old slaughterhouse built in 1890 in the heart of Anderlecht, one of the southern districts of Brussels. It is now filled with dozens of mobile stalls, where buyers can find plants, food, clothes, shoes, rugs, cosmetics, electrical appliances and even live animals at low prices.

Thanks to an investment of more than €7 million from the European Regional Development Fund, l’Abattoir can now also count an area of sedentary traders: Foodmet. Visitors can find meat, fish, fruits

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and vegetables there, as well as nuts, olives, herbs or other fresh products.

The 12,000 square meter bazaar is at the heart of a disadvantaged multicultural neighbourhood, “hence the importance of economic activities on the site”, explains Geneviève Planchar, Communications Officer with the Brussels Regional Civil Service.

GREEN ECONOMY TO BOOST GROWTH

The Abattoir is far more than just a market but a symbol of circular economy in Brussels. The EU funding has also enabled the building of one of the largest aquaponics urban farm in Europe, with an area of about 4,000 m2, on the rooftop of Foodmet.

The aquaponic technology is based on a combination of fish farming and fruit & vegetable, herbs, juvenile plants, mini tubers and microgreens production along with more traditional vegetables. Plants feed themselves with water enriched by fish excrement that works as fertiliser.

The farm is divided in two and includes 2,000 m2 of horticultural greenhouses and a connected fish farm, as well as 2,000 m2 of outdoor vegetable gardens.

To keep both greenhouses and water used for aquaculture at a temperature, it uses the heat from the fridges of the food market, producing fruits and vegetables while protecting the food market from overheating and the cold.

Moreover, all materials used to build the farm are recyclable. The farm aims to reduce water consumption and therefore, part of it is filtered rainwater. It also uses solar panels to produce energy.

“The town turns into a solution if it seeks a positive impact at all possible levels: energy, water, air quality, biodiversity, material resources... while creating jobs and promoting integration”, explains Steven Beckers, architect and founder of BIGH (Building Integrated GreenHouses), the company in charge of the project.

The aim of the farm, which will be fully operational by the end of the year, is to produce local food for a local market, reducing emissions from transportation, and to boost growth in a depressed neighbourhood.

“In theory, it was possible to put in place a project like this in the countryside. However, we would have lost part of the ‘circular aspect’,” the architect of the project underlines.

In fact, the market has created jobs and helped reactivate the local economy. The project also foresees building houses in the neighbouring area of the market, as well as promoting social activities.

“The social aspect of this project was essential to me. We provide with job opportunities to the local population while bringing the farmers and the consumers closer,” Beckers stresses.

Both the project of the urban farm and the food market were finalists in the RegioStars Awards, awarded by the European Commission, in 2016.