



# REPORT

ON A STUDY OF THE ATTITUDES OF POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS FROM THE PRIORITY SECTOR OF AGRICULTURE AND FOOD PRODUCTION IN THE BORDER REGIONS OF SMOLYAN, BLAGOEVGRAD, HASKOVO AND KARDZHALI TOWARDS THE POSSIBILITY OF SETTING UP AND JOINING A BUSINESS COUNCIL



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





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## 1. Explanatory Notes

This report on the study of the attitudes of potential participants from the priority Agriculture and Food Production sector in the border regions of Smolyan, Blagoevgrad, Haskovo and Kardzhali towards the possibility of setting up and joining a Business Council is prepared in implementation of Activity 2 and Activity 3 of the Business Council Project – 6275\_BC, financed under Subsidy Contact No. B6.3a.18/13.04.2021, Territorial Cooperation Program Interreg V-A Greece – Bulgaria 2014-2020.



In the implementation of Activity 2 and Activity 3, all the requirements of the Contracting Authority (Beneficiary) have been met, as we have strictly adhered to the requirements set out in the technical specification and the technical proposal. Due to the interrelatedness between the implementation of Activity 2 and the implementation of Activity 3, a survey of attitudes was carried out at the same time, and the results were combined in this document referred to as *Report on a Survey of the Attitudes of Potential Participants from the Agriculture and Food Production Sector in the Border Regions of Smolyan, Blagoevgrad, Haskovo and Kardzhali to the Possibility of Setting up and Joining a Business Council*.

## 2. Introduction

In connection with the implementation of Contract No. 3/17.11.2021 and in accordance with the technical specification for the implementation of the public procurement, a selection by public invitation for the following purpose - providing services for the implementation of the Business Council Project – 6275\_BC, financed under Subsidy Contact No. B6.3a.18/13.04.2021, a survey was conducted regarding the attitudes of target groups towards setting up and joining a business council.

The purpose of the survey was to establish the specific needs, opinions and recommendations of the business representatives in the border areas in order to solve the problems and challenges they face, as well as for the purpose of partnership, which will help the consolidation of the factors influencing entrepreneurial success, stimulate survival of businesses and promote an entrepreneurial culture.

As a result, the Contractor has prepared this report, which graphically presents the results of the survey conducted. Based on them, a thorough analysis of the needs and

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problems of the representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector in the border areas has been made and main conclusions have been drawn. They should serve as the basis for the work of newly established business councils in the project mentioned above.

The target group of the survey, conducted for the needs of the project and used as the foundation of this report, are the representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector in the border regions of Blagoevgrad, Smolyan, Haskovo and Kardzhali.

It is important to point out that in connection with the implementation of the project, all the business representatives from the various priority sectors were asked the same survey questions, and therefore the same methodology was used. In this respect, the reports have a common methodology part, but they differ in their analytical parts.

### 3. Methodology



The study of these attitudes was carried out using the following methods:

- A telephone survey;
- Filling out a questionnaire in a web-based form;
- Organizing individual and group sessions;

The survey included representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector in the regions of Smolyan, Blagoevgrad, Haskovo and Kardzhali and the respondents were divided proportionally according to the representatives of the sector in the towns and villages in each region.

The questions developed for the purpose of the study were anonymous as they usually have an advantage as the surveyed participants feel better about sending their personal information to "third parties". Also, anonymous surveys ensure more trust and thus more feedback, and the goal of the survey was to make respondents feel comfortable and secure while providing open and honest feedback.

The survey cards have been prepared in such a way that it takes as little time as possible to fill in, but gives a realistic idea of the opinions and attitudes of the representatives of the target group. Survey cards contain both specific questions tailored to the target groups and general questions focused on common problems faced by the business representatives. The survey also included questions related to the sector's developmental potential after setting up a business council.

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The content of the questionnaires includes several types of questions aimed at studying the attitudes towards setting up a business council and participation of the target groups in it. They aim to bring more clarity in the following areas:

Survey of attitudes towards setting up a business council and its benefits for the business of the representatives;

Self-determination of business representatives (to which of the priority sectors they fall) and number of employees;

Studying the attitudes of target groups towards their participation in cross-border projects and their cooperation with cross-border partners;

What are the main difficulties and problems they often face, including finding manpower;

What are their attitudes towards membership in a business council and its functions, role and benefits for the specific priority sector;

The questions included in the survey card for representatives of the agriculture and food production sector are of a closed type, those allowing the expression of opinions and those with the option of more than one answer.

Having in mind that often in surveys, respondents instinctively mark the first possible answers that are brought to the fore, and to prevent such a possibility, the possible answers are not short and require the respondent to think. This guarantees awareness when the respondents mark the answers and makes the results accurate and reliable.

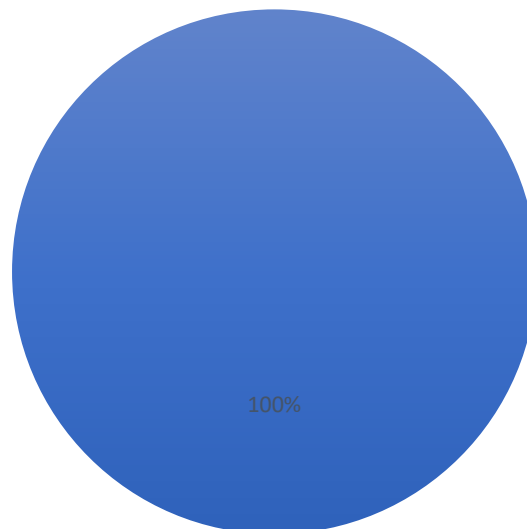
When applying the methodology for the analysis of the collected data, a standard logically determined process was used, which includes the following three main stages:

- Collection of initial information and data (the survey);
- Analysis of the collected information;
- Formulation of evaluation conclusions, comments and recommendations (the preparation of a report);

## 4. Results and Analysis of the Survey of the Attitudes of Representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production Sector towards Setting up and Participation in a Business Council

The respondents from this target group are 51, and the comparison of the results will be done on the basis of the number of respondents or distributed in percentages. For the needs of this project, we did a survey with the following questions and received the following answers:

1. Do you think that setting up a business council will contribute to a better relationship between business and institutions?

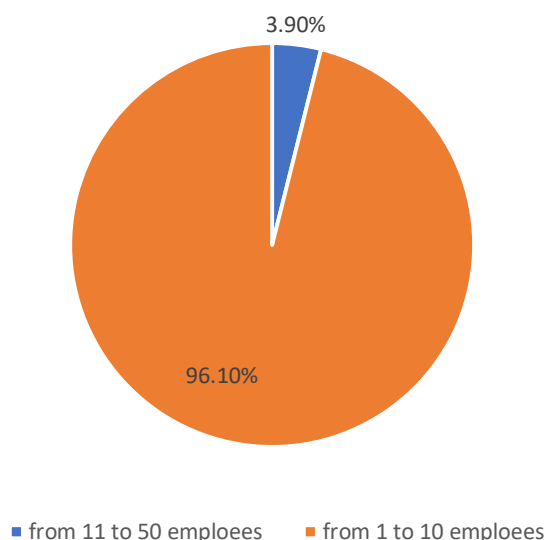


Regarding the first question, 100% of the surveyed representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector believe that setting up a business council will contribute to a better relationship between them and the institutions involved in the sector. No representative responded negatively.

This question provides a strong and clear approval by the representatives of this target sector that setting up a business council is beneficial and of key importance for the development of the sector. A business council will be a fundamental link between business representatives and institutions. In addition, the business council will potentially improve the business environment in the sector, as it will proactively solve problems.

With the help of question No. 2 of the survey, which is an identifying question we can figure out a representative of which of the priority sectors of the project has filled out the web-based survey. As we have mentioned above, there are 51 representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector.

### 3. In your company you employ...



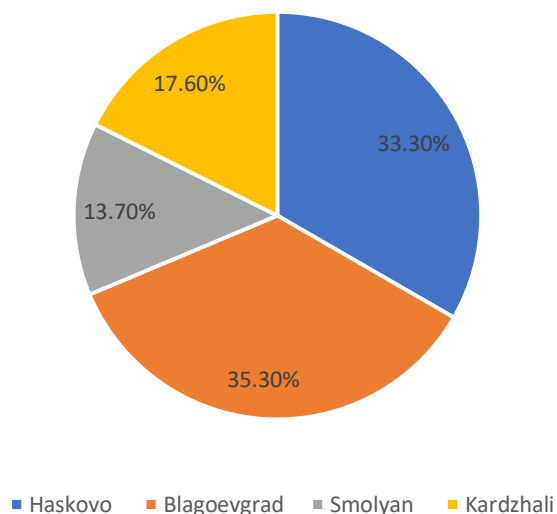
Regarding the answers to question No. 3, it is evident that 1 to 10 people are generally employed in the Agriculture and Food Production sector, and 96.1% of the respondents confirmed these data. The remaining 3.9% employ from 11 to 50 employees. No representative interviewed stated that they had more than 50 employees. This is due to the fact that the companies working in the sector are mostly small or medium-sized enterprises engaged in agriculture, including animal husbandry, milk processing, meat processing, production of bread, pasta, confectionery, etc.



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#### 4. Which region are you in?



It is important to note that the surveys were sent proportionally to representatives of the sector from all priority areas, and according to the answers to question No.4 it is clear that the largest share or 35.3% of the surveyed representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector falls on the district of Blagoevgrad, due to the fact that with a web-based survey, the observance of an exact proportion is impossible, since the recipients of the survey have also shared it with other representatives of this branch.

Second is Haskovo region with 33.3%, followed by Kardzhali region with 17.6% and Smolyan region with 13.7%, ranks second with a close result.

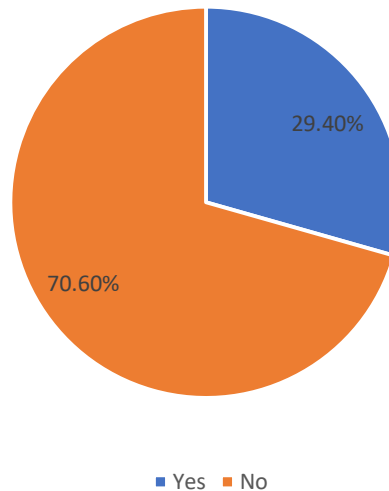


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## 5. Have you participated in a cross-border project?



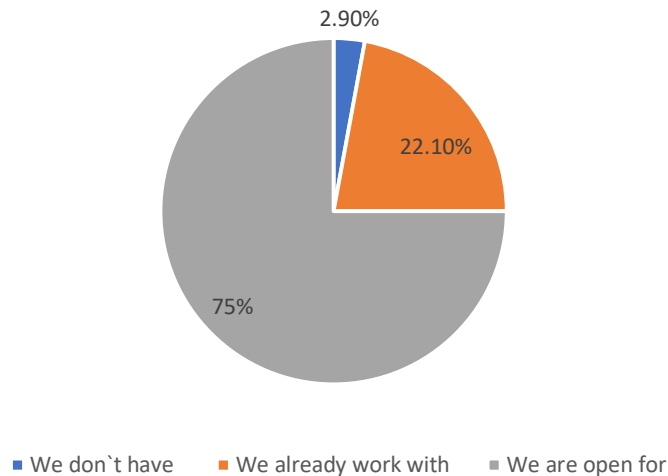
The responses to question No. 5 were as follows - 70.6% of the representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector gave a negative answer regarding their participation in cross-border projects, and 29.4% gave a positive answer.

The reason for these responses can be found in the lack of training and information. This is unequivocal evidence that one of the issues that the business council should consider is providing an awareness environment and training for the participation in projects under various operational programs and European funds, as well as looking for partners in cross-border areas from the same management sector.

It is important to note that there is a possibility that the representatives of the sector have not participated in cross-border projects, since in Bulgaria there have been purposeful efforts to support small and medium-sized businesses, through programs of the Agriculture Fund, including funding local initiative groups and private projects from the Agriculture and Food Production sector affiliated with them.

Therefore, it is necessary for the newly formed business council to set clear boundaries, activate and direct its members to get involved in those programs from which the development of these businesses would benefit. This should include disseminating information through various information channels and/or brochures about the benefits of cross-border projects, which are particularly important for the development of border areas.

## 6. What is your attitude towards working with foreign partners in your management sector?

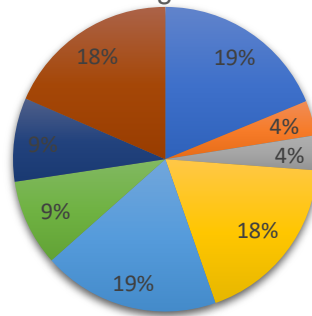


Regarding question No. 6, which aims at measuring the attitudes of the representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector towards cooperating with foreign partners. It is evident that a large number of these representatives are open to partnerships and cooperation with foreign representatives in their sphere of management, namely 75%. In the second place, with 22.1%, the respondents indicated that they already work with foreign representatives of the business, but are still open to working with new partners. Only 2.9% representatives of the target group have no need for partnership with foreign representatives.

The smaller number of those working in partnership and the large number of those seeking such partnerships outline the next priority for the business council, i.e. focusing the efforts on building partnerships, both with business councils in Greece and expanding partnerships within the European Union.

A functional business council could work to create the right business environment in which business representatives seek and find partner organizations from their sphere of management and, accordingly, help to create partner relationships and joint work.

7. Please, describe in short the main difficulties that you face when interacting with institutions.



- Lack of business consultation
- Unfriendly administration
- Slow administrative service
- High local taxes and fees
- Hard-to-reach managers
- Lack of electronic control
- Lack of awareness of the issues
- Lack of specific expertise

According to this survey, two of the main difficulties faced by the representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector in their joint work with the institutions that stand out in the foreground with 18.8% each, are the lack of consultation with the businesses when formulating the policies that affect them and the slow administrative service. In the second place, with the same percentages of 18.5%, are the problems with the lack of specific expertise of the representatives of the administration in business matters and the lack of electronic management. 9.2% of the respondents believe that there is a lack of awareness of the problems facing businesses, and 8.9% believe that local taxes and fees are high. In the last place, with 3.7% are such problems as difficult accessibility to the managers in the institutions and unfriendly administration.

The results obtained from this question should be the starting point for one of the main priorities of the business council, namely, to improve the behavior of the administration by giving feedback and recommendations, thus increasing the trust of businesses towards the administration.

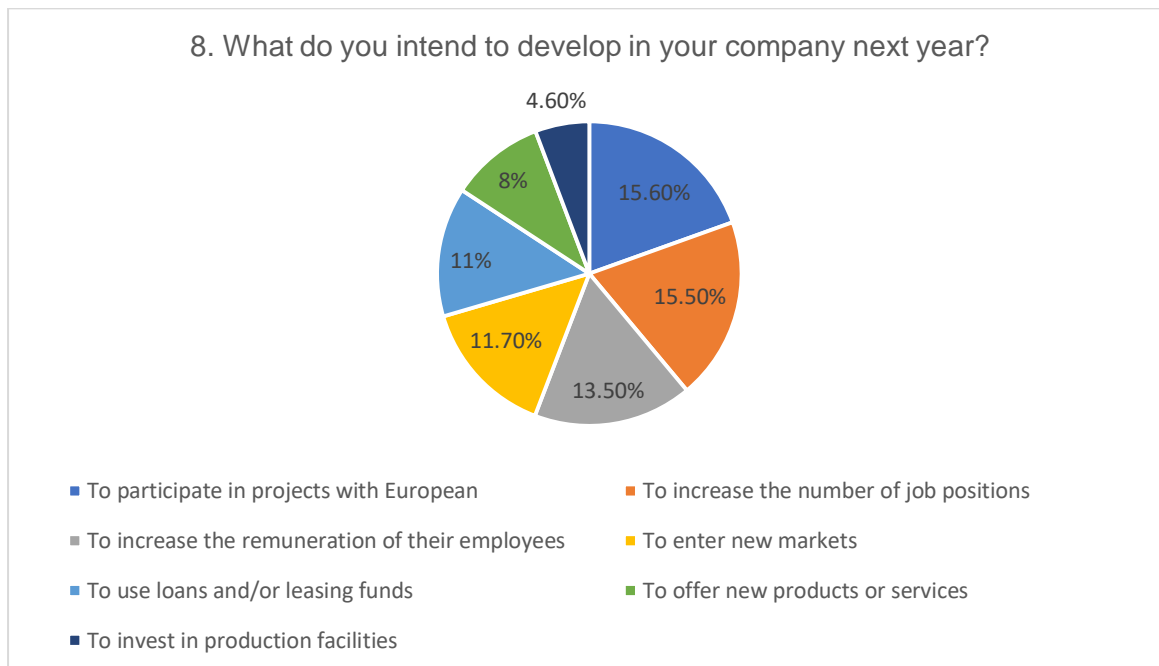
Another major problem in the joint work between businesses and the administration is the lack of trust in the representatives of the executive and local authorities. This hinders the companies' initiative and demotivates them to take an active part in the process. On the other hand, this contributes to the buildup of attitudes of the type "there is no point in such cooperation". This, combined with lobbying practices and the lack of invitations to

participate in the decision-making process, completes the picture of the most common obstacles to good cooperation between businesses and administration. A business council should aim at changing precisely these attitudes of business representatives.

Therefore, a business council could require the district administrations to include business representatives in the discussions at the earliest possible stage, when their participation would have the greatest effect on the policies made and the management decisions made, and, in addition, require feedback about the progress made on the topics and issues discussed.

Day-to-day communication, coordination and management of the partnership will ensure the necessary smoothing of differences and the achievement of better mutual understanding between the participating organizations.

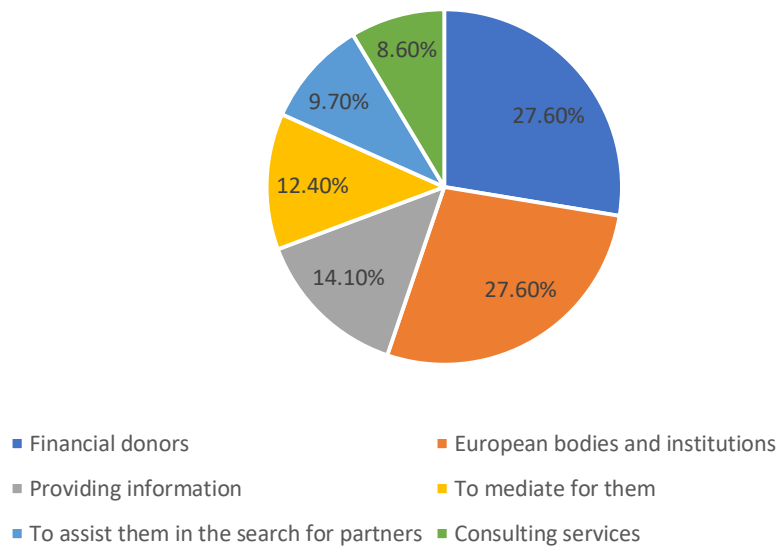
Clear and transparent mechanisms of interaction with the administration are the key to more active involvement of businesses in the process of articulating public policies. Receiving information from the administration about the measures taken in response to certain proposals is also an important element that influences the commitment of the representatives of the sector. It is also necessary to create a form of permanent partnership between businesses and the administration in order to have visible results in terms of the development of the sector.



Question No. 8 also provided the possibility of marking more than one answer, and several answers stand out here with almost the same percentages, as follows: 15.6% of respondents plan to participate in projects with European and/or national funding or to increase the volume of production, 15.5% plan to increase the number of job positions, and 13.5% to increase the remuneration of their employees. 11.7% plan to enter new markets, and 11% to use loans and/or leasing funds. 8% of the respondents want to offer new products or services on the market, and lastly, with 4.6% are the intentions to invest in production facilities or in innovations and new brands.

In the context of the survey results described above, the business council will be a developmental tool that provides the framework for dialogue and activation of stakeholders around an economic or social problem, working towards its solution.

9. What kind of help and cooperation do you expect from representatives of institutions in the future?



The interviewed representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector in the border regions of Smolyan, Haskovo, Kardzhali and Blagoevgrad expect representatives of the institutions to provide them with information about the business environment and about new legislation, regarding the possibilities for financing and/or assistance through various financial donors (27.6%), as well as for training and mediation with national and European bodies and institutions (27.6%).

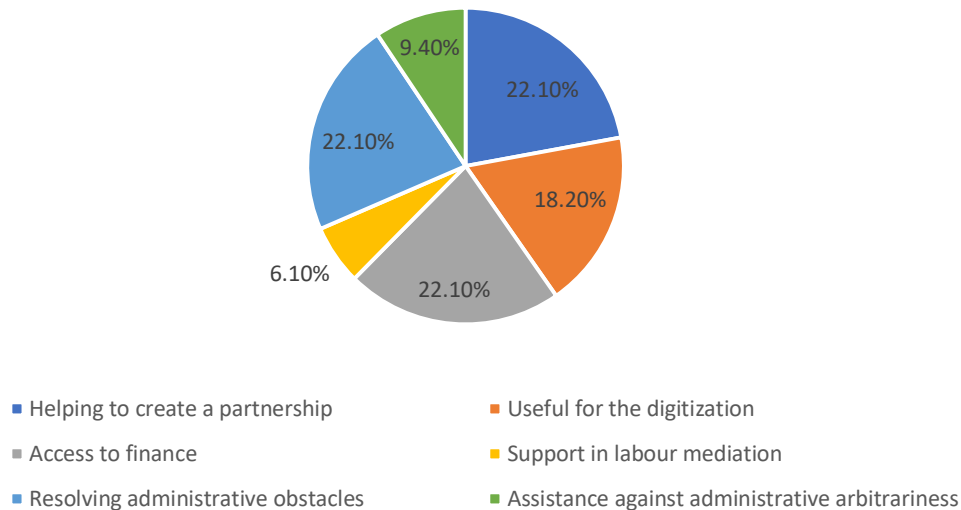
A smaller part of the respondents expect help in providing information about the business environment and new legislation, 14.1%, and 12.4% believe that it is necessary for the institutions to mediate for them before national and European bodies. 9.7% of the

target group want the institutions to assist them in the search for partners at the local or foreign markets, and 8.6% want to be provided with consulting services

Taking these data into account, the business council can set itself the goal of negotiating with municipal and/or regional administrations in the priority areas for assistance and conducting training for beneficiaries under the various programs, regardless of the type of funding, as well as assisting its members in the preparation of project proposals with the help of experts from the municipal administrations or through building permanent relationships with the local initiative groups in the various regions.

The business council could build clear and transparent mechanisms by organising permanent working groups, holding meetings and informing and training target groups on how to interact and how to set realistic goals and expectations for the partnership process. This will guarantee not only the interested parties being proactive, but also the sustainability of the cooperation processes.

### 10. In which areas would a Business Council provide useful service and protection of your interests?

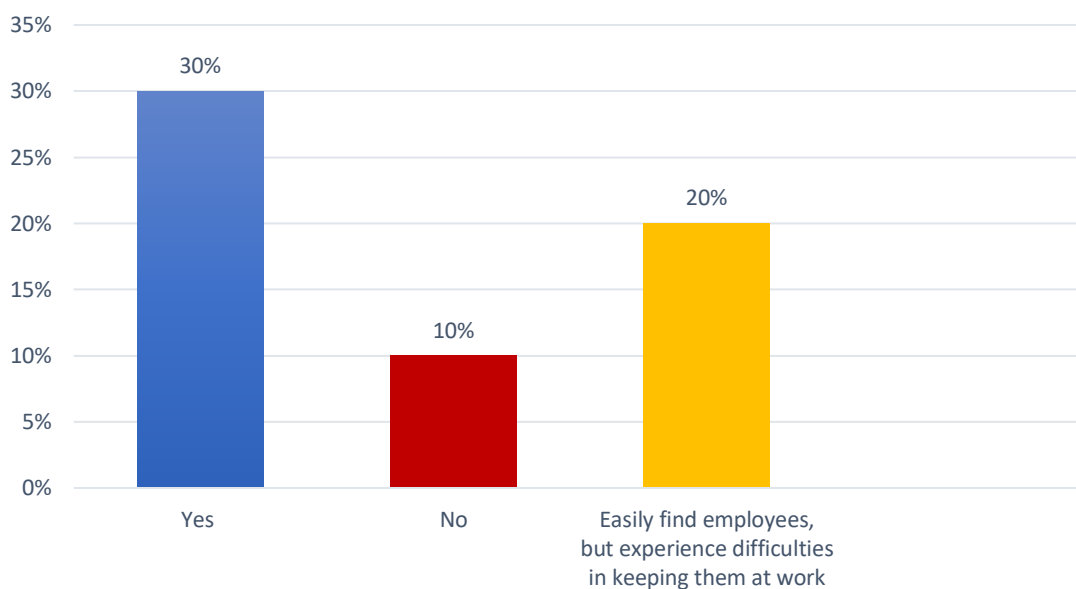


Regarding the answers to question No. 10, the representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector believe that a business council could be useful in solving administrative obstacles, access to financing and in helping to create a partnership relationship with local and foreign representatives of the sector with 22.1% responses to each of the three. 18.2% believe that the business council would be useful for the

digitization of the sector, 9.5% expect assistance against administrative arbitrariness, and 6.1% expect support in labour mediation and labour legislation.

In the context of the answers received, the business council can set such goals as: facilitating the training processes and exchanging experiences in order to become familiar with the regulatory framework, creating relationships with the administration to minimise its arbitrariness and foster their cooperation in solving problems within their expertise.

### 11. Do you experience difficulties in finding employees?



According to the answers to question No. 11, the representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector in the border regions of Smolyan, Blagoevgrad, Kardzhali and Haskovo are commonly experiencing difficulty in finding workers.

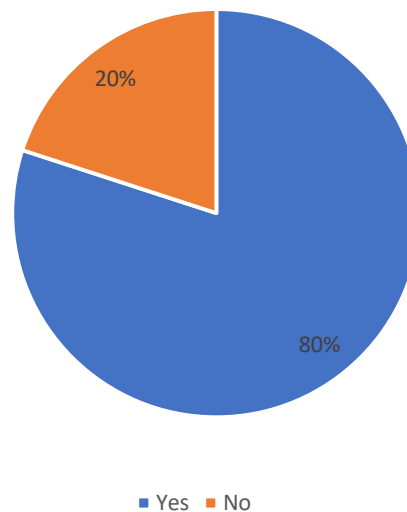
The representatives of the target groups who easily find employees, but experience difficulties in keeping them at work, come in the second place, and only one representative of the target group experiences difficulties in finding labor.

On the one hand, the results described above may indicate that the lack of manpower for businesses is among the main problems in the priority areas. A large part of the economic sectors feel the need for personnel with the necessary qualifications for work. This shortage is getting worse more and more noticeably due to the pandemic, and the trend of lack of qualified labor is becoming one of the main challenges for businesses. Therefore, the business council can set itself the goal of initiating a dialogue with the

representatives of the sector, which should say what kind of specialists it needs and, accordingly, bring this to the attention of the relevant institutions and/or universities.

On the other hand, usually those employed in the Agriculture and Food Production sector are people with an average and/or lower level of education, therefore, we can make a justified conclusion that it is possible that the salaries in the sector are too low. Therefore, it is necessary for the business council to analyze the specific situation for the sector by proposing measures which could improve the situation with the labor market in the priority areas.

12. Do you think that your business will benefit from a partnership with foreign business representatives? Will you take actions in this direction?



From the answers to question No. 12, it is clear that a very large part of the business representatives believe that by implementing a partnership with foreign representatives they could improve their sector and they may take actions in this direction (80%).

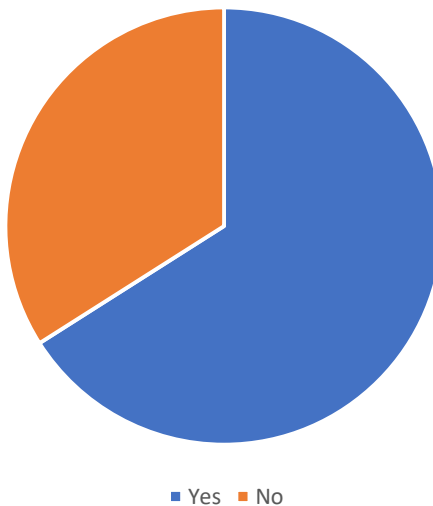
Only 20% of the respondents answered negatively and would not like to take actions in the direction of partnership with foreign representatives.

In the context of the above and the request for partnerships from the majority of the surveyed target groups, it is important to mention that the creation of a partnership is a long and difficult process that requires the partners to share resources and assets (time, knowledge and efforts).



In relation to the above issue, the business council will engage in specific actions aimed at liaising individuals from the private sector with foreign ones on the principle of equality; joint work on defining and tracking the achievement of common goals; building on and complementing each other's positive sides and assets for a stronger partnership; work with the business council in Greece, etc.

13. Will you participate in a Business Council in order to support business development in the border areas?



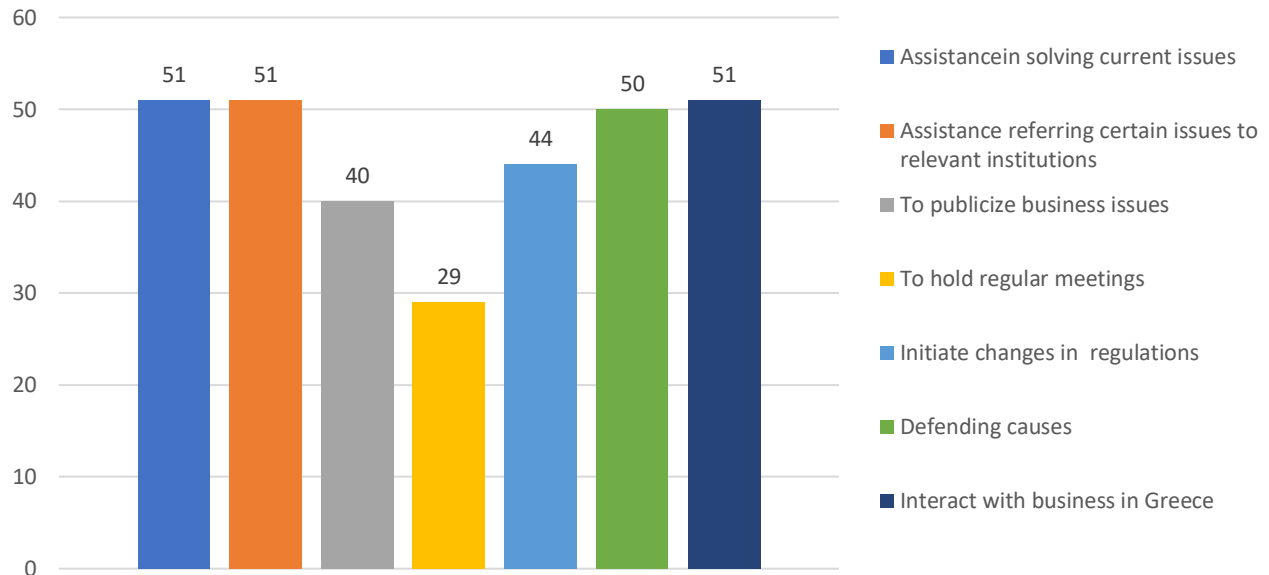
According to the answers received to question No. 13, 66% of surveyed representatives of the target group would become members of a Business Council in order to support the development of their businesses in the border areas, 34% would not join it.

The reason for the large number of negative answers can be found in the lack of conviction that there can be collaboration between the institutions and the business council and uncertainty that there could be an environment in which the various participants would work together.

The Business Council should focus its efforts at showing that such collaboration is possible by using the opportunity to invite representatives of local authorities to attend its meetings, immediately listen to the problems and ensure personal commitment to their solution.

In general, the attitudes towards joining a business council are good, but after being established, it should aim at changing the negative opinions, as it is the participation in the business council that would contribute to the development of the sector.

#### 14. What do you expect the role of a Business Council to be?



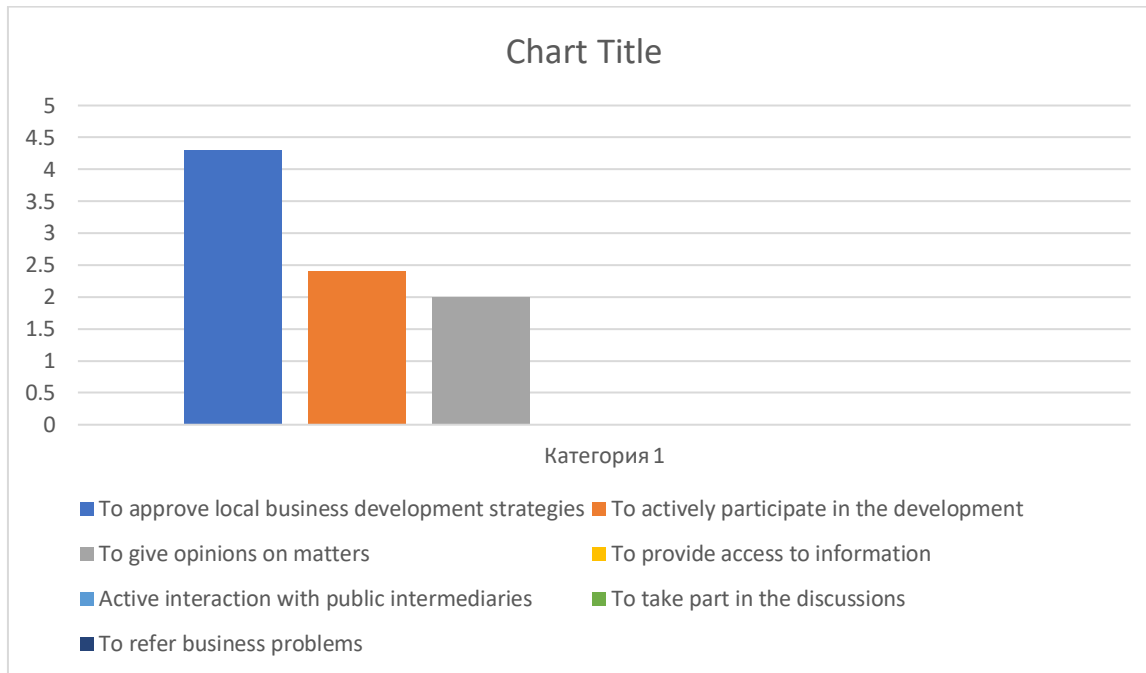
This question also could have multiple answers. In the responses of the target groups to what they expect the role of a business council should be, three answers stand out with the same frequency, namely: the business council should assist businesses in solving current issues, assist businesses by referring certain issues to the relevant institutions and interact with the business councils in Greece.

In the next position with 44 marked answers, the respondents believe that the business council should defend the causes which would lead to the development of the sector at the cross-border level, followed by the answers that it should make the problems of the businesses heard by referring certain issues to the relevant institutions (40) and holding regular meetings (29).

Based on the results described above, there is a clear trend that the target groups expect the business council to have a broad key role. In this line of thinking, the business representatives need a community that stands behind them in all difficulties, supporting them adequately for any crisis situation they might face.

A relatively small number of representatives of the sector want the business council to hold regular meetings, perhaps due to the fact the representatives of the sector are

very busy. Despite the obtained results, the meetings of the business council should take place at least twice a year.



Regarding the results obtained from the answers to this question, first of all the target groups (51) believe that the business council should be able to take part in the discussions of the municipal budgets in the region. 49 representatives believe that the council should actively participate in the development of regional and municipal strategic and planning documents, and 42 answered that it should participate in the exchange of experience and good practices in the cross-border region.

In connection with the latter, the newly formed business council has the opportunity to work in close cooperation with the same council in the Agriculture and Food Production sector on the territory of Greece, with the aim of carrying out a cross-border exchange of experience for the integration of good practices.

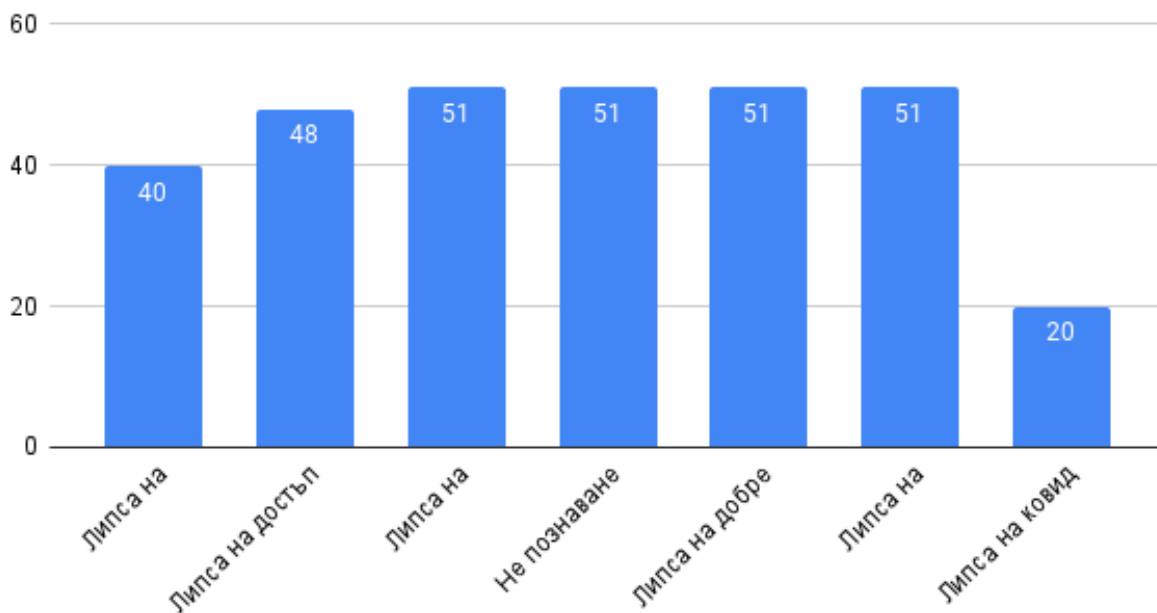
41 representatives of the sector want the business council to have the authority to approve strategies for business development at the local level, the answers being as follows: to provide administrative assistance to the business in its communication with institutions about certain issues and problems (38), to give opinions on issues concerning the development of businesses at the local level to the competent institutions (35), to refer business problems to the municipal councils in the region of the business council (22), to

provide access to information for its members and business representatives regarding questions and problems, which is marked by (15) and finally with 10 - to actively interact with public mediators.

Regarding the small number of representatives willing for the business council to actively interact with public mediators, this might be due to the lack of understanding of the term "public mediator", therefore one of the goals of the business council will be to acquaint the representatives with the institutions and the terminology they use.

All the powers of the business council marked in the survey are possible to implement, and through their implementation, the representatives of the sector will be represented to the institutions, and it can work purposefully to support them on various topics.

16. Какви са основните предизвикателства и трудности, които срещат предприемачите и представителите на бизнеса във вашия регион?



What is noticeable in the results obtained for question #16 and the difficulties experienced by the sector is that the target group provided 51 answers to four questions: lack of industrial zones, they do not know well the instruments of the European funds and programs, there is a lack of good infrastructure and lack of transport connectivity. What follows are answers with an approximately equal results: 48 people have a problem with access to financing, 40 - with finding workers, and lastly, with 20 answers, the

representatives believe that no measures have been taken to deal with the Covid crisis in the sector.

The relatively equal results of the received answers show that the sector is experiencing difficulties in many different directions, i.e. the business council should cover a wide range of problematic situations without limiting itself to specific ones and provide diverse support of the Agriculture and Food Production sector.



In connection with the above, the business council will aim to assist the sector in all difficulties it is facing, including organizing training and encouraging lifelong learning to address labor shortages. It will mediate between the representatives of the sector and the institutions, proposing specific projects and it could initiate meetings with various executives to improve transport connectivity and/or other infrastructure necessary for the development of the specific sector.

In addition to the above, the business council will offer informational materials and/or organize training in order to acquaint the target groups with the tools of the European funds and programs, including inviting speakers/experts from the municipalities or local initiative groups.

## 5. Conclusions based on the survey of the Agriculture and Food Production sector in the districts of Smolyan, Kardzhali, Haskovo and Blagoevgrad regarding the setting up of a Business Council

The impact processes between business representatives and institutions are complex and multi-layered. Within the framework of the conducted survey of the attitudes towards the setting up and participation of the target group in a business council, several main points have been highlighted:

Issue	Conclusion
Insufficient awareness and lack of communication channels of both groups	This issue is relevant to both sides -the representatives of the businesses and the representatives of the administration in the various institutions. Creating a functioning business council will help facilitate communication between the two groups, thus keeping each group informed on issues affecting its sphere of governance.

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<p>Poor knowledge of the legal framework concerning the business representatives</p>	<p>Unfortunately, the representatives of the Agriculture and Food Production sector do not have any or have poor knowledge regarding the legal framework that affects their work. Therefore, the functioning of a business council would help identify the specific needs and organise training on specific topics and/or exchange of experience with partner organizations.</p>
<p>Business councils and/or other similar organisations are not common.</p>	<p>The common practice both in the studied regions and on the territory of the entire country shows that there is a lack of desire to participate in such organizations on the part of businesses . Therefore, their inclusion in such initiatives involves a lot of flexibility on the part of experts and/or organizations. On the other hand, membership in such associations would lead to an improvement of the business climate in the various sectors.</p>
<p>The expectations of businesses in terms of assistance from the institutions are not within their powers</p>	<p>Business representatives lack a clear idea of the functions of the various institutions and to whom they should refer their problems.</p>

## 6. Conclusion



Setting up a business council aims to improve the business climate by interacting with all stakeholders involved in the development of the sector. The business council will be guided entirely by the desire to build conditions for proper market relations, confirm lasting partnership relations in the cross-border region, interact with institutions and comply with the requirements of good European development practices.

The business council will provide consulting, information and other types of services to the companies/enterprises that are members of it. The members of the

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management board will be ready to investigate any business issues that may arise and take appropriate legal action to protect the interests of the business representatives united in the business council.

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