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O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Bulgaria

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RAPIV

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1 Introduction

This Regional Action Plan (RAP) is developed within the framework of the WE.Circular project, an Interreg Danube Region Programme initiative aimed at empowering women entrepreneurs in the Danube Region by fostering their circular and digital transitions.

The WE.Circular project recognizes that Bulgaria faces unique challenges and opportunities in supporting women-led businesses in adopting circular economy principles and leveraging digital technologies. This RAP builds upon a foundation of thorough analysis and stakeholder engagement, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness for the region.

Specifically, this RAP leverages the findings of the following key activities within the WE.Circular project:

- **Activity 1.1: Transnational Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis:** This analysis, conducted across all partner countries, identified the specific skills gaps and needs of women entrepreneurs in the region regarding digital technologies, circular economy principles, and smart specialization strategies.
- **Activity 3.2: Analyzing of existing policy and legislative framework:** This activity mapped the existing policy and regulatory landscape at both the national and regional levels, identifying existing support mechanisms and potential barriers to the circular and digital transition of women-led businesses.
- Recommendations from **National Stakeholder Group (NSHG):** Throughout the project, the project team has consulted with a National Stakeholder Group comprised of policy makers, business support organizations, academia and companies with the aim to validate existing data and gather relevant feedback in key action areas.

The proposed actions in this RAP are designed to address the specific challenges identified through these activities and are tailored to the unique regional context. The implementation of this RAP aims to contribute to the broader objectives of the WE.Circular project, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable circular economy within the Danube Region.

2 Strategic Background and Foundations of the Regional Action Plan

The development of the Bulgarian Regional Action Plan (RAP) is based on evidence and consultation gathered through the WE.Circular project activities. It consolidates results from the **National Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis (A1.1)**, the **Policy and Legislative Framework Review (A3.2)**, insights from the **National Stakeholder Group consultations**, and outcomes from **Transnational Learning Events** featuring good practices across Europe.

Bulgaria is a small open economy in South-eastern Europe, characterized by a dominant share of micro and small enterprises (over 92% of all SMEs). Women represent nearly **40% of the self-employed** and **41% of company managers**, but their participation is often concentrated in smaller, younger firms and in traditionally female-dominated sectors such as services, retail, and fashion.

The **Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis** highlighted several key features of the female entrepreneurial ecosystem. Bulgaria possesses a relatively well-developed network of institutions, clusters, and NGOs supporting women entrepreneurs, such as **RAPIV**, **Selena Association**, and **Smart Lady**, but most initiatives are project-based and lack long-term sustainability.

Women show strong motivation for professional development and are highly active in non-formal education. However, barriers such as **lack of time, high training costs, and family responsibilities** often prevent participation. In business terms, the main drivers for adopting **circular economy (CE)** practices are personal commitment, green mindset, and cost reduction; while for **digital transformation**, they include competitiveness, efficiency, and quality improvement.

Nevertheless, the transition remains hindered by **limited access to finance, lack of tailored training, and insufficient information on funding opportunities**. Few women-led enterprises are familiar with the **Smart Specialization Strategy (S3)**, and digital adoption is still below the EU average — only **33% of SMEs** have basic digital intensity.

The **Policy and Legislative Framework Review (A3.2)** confirmed that while Bulgaria has an extensive portfolio of strategic documents promoting circularity and digitalization, **no**

specific national policy exists for women's entrepreneurship. Gender equality is treated as a cross-cutting theme within programs such as:

- **National Development Programme Bulgaria 2030** – includes a dedicated priority for Circular and Low-Carbon Economy;
- **National Strategy for SMEs 2021–2027** – focuses on competitiveness, digitalization, and sustainability;
- **Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization 2021–2027** – defines five priority areas, including “Cleantech, circular and low-carbon economy”;
- **Operational Programmes for Competitiveness, Human Resources Development, and Research & Innovation** – provide instruments for digitalization, green transition, and business growth.

However, these frameworks **lack targeted measures for women entrepreneurs.** National funding schemes, such as ICT vouchers, circular economy grants, and cyber security solutions for SMEs remain gender-neutral. The stakeholders recognize this gap and recommends specific training, mentoring, and consulting measures for female entrepreneurs, especially in sectors like textiles, food and agriculture, and manufacturing.

Consolidating findings from the analyses, consultations, and the **3rd National Stakeholder Group meeting (April 2025)**, several persistent challenges have been validated:

- **Limited specialized training** on circular and digital skills tailored for women entrepreneurs;
- **Low awareness** of existing support instruments, legal frameworks, and funding opportunities;
- **Insufficient financial mechanisms** and complex procedures for micro and small enterprises;
- **Weak cooperation** between public institutions and ecosystem actors;
- **Restricted access to mentoring and networking**, particularly in technology-oriented sectors;
- **Lack of time and work-life balance constraints**, preventing participation in learning and innovation activities;

- **Low access to modern digital tools and infrastructure**, especially in rural areas.

These findings were confirmed during the **National Co-creation Workshop in Prague (June 2025)**, where Bulgarian participants emphasized the need for systemic policy support, better coordination among ministries, and inclusive approaches integrating gender, sustainability, and innovation policies.

Based on stakeholder feedback and WE.Circular transnational learning, the following recommendations guide the RAP development:

- **Develop targeted training programs** on digital and circular economy for women entrepreneurs, integrating practical tools, peer learning, and mentoring;
- **Create awareness and information campaigns** to improve understanding of legal, financial, and environmental frameworks;
- **Facilitate access to finance** through advisory services, simplified procedures, and links with investors and business angels;
- **Enhance cooperation and policy alignment** between ministries, municipalities, academia, and women's business networks;
- **Establish a national mentoring and networking platform** to connect women entrepreneurs with experts, role models, and peers in priority sectors;
- **Introduce incentives for circular and digital innovation**, particularly for female-led enterprises;
- **Promote flexible learning models** (e-learning, hybrid mentoring) to accommodate women's time constraints.

Several **European good practices** observed during WE.Circular Transnational Learning Events provide valuable inspiration for Bulgaria's RAP:

- **EWA – Empowering Women in Agrifood (Bulgaria/Romania)** – a successful mentoring and funding model for female entrepreneurs in agrifood;
- **Circular Economy Forum Austria** – a multi-stakeholder platform integrating training, networking, and innovation labs for circular transition;
- **Womenture Pre-Acceleration Program (Hungary)** – combines mentoring, skills development, and investment readiness support for female-led startups;
- **Advance Circular (Slovenia)** – offers modular, research-based training tools for circularity in tourism, adaptable for Bulgarian contexts;

- **Start-up BW Female Accelerator (Germany)** – demonstrates a government-led framework promoting female entrepreneurship and visibility;
- **ABC Entrepreneurship Program (Slovenia)** – integrates training with financial incentives and long-term monitoring, achieving high survival rates among women-led businesses.

These practices collectively demonstrate the effectiveness of holistic support systems combining education, mentorship, funding, and community-building. Their adaptable elements, particularly the mentoring networks, voucher schemes, and peer-learning models are highly relevant for Bulgaria's RAP implementation.

3 Vision

By 2030, Bulgaria will foster a strong, inclusive and sustainable ecosystem in which women entrepreneurs lead the circular and digital transformation through improved skills, access to finance, innovation support and active participation in policy and smart specialization priorities.

4 Regional Action Plan Measures

4.1 Measure 1: Building circular and digital skills for women entrepreneurs

Pillars: Measure 1 is contributing to the strategic pillars:

- ☒ Circular economy transition,
- ☒ Digital transition
- ☐ Policy improvement
- ☒ Smart Specialization

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Lack of specialized training on circular and digital skills tailored for women entrepreneurs;
- Limited access to practical tools and mentors;
- Low awareness of S3 opportunities and digital instruments;
- Time constraints and limited access to learning in rural areas.

Actions for implementation of Measure 1:

1.1 Acquisition and improvement of circular and digital skills among businesses through the WE.Circular training programme or a similar initiative.

Delivery and periodic updating of the *Smart and Sustainable Women Entrepreneurship Training Programme* to enhance women entrepreneurs' competences in circular economy, digital transformation, and smart specialisation. The action will ensure continuous training opportunities, inclusion of Bulgarian case studies, and adaptation of content to new EU policy frameworks.

1.2 Organisation of peer-learning circles connected to the training programme, supporting participants in applying digital and circular solutions in their businesses.

Establish thematic peer-learning circles to provide individualised guidance and exchange of experience. Activities will include one peer session annually, linking participants with successful women-led companies, investors, and digital experts.

1.3 Expand the WE.Circular Learning Network in Bulgaria by attracting new members and connecting them to the transnational platform for continued cooperation and knowledge exchange.

Increase the number of Bulgarian members in the WE.Circular Learning Network (universities, chambers, NGOs, municipalities, and business-support organizations) and connect them to the transnational platform for continued knowledge sharing and cooperation.

1.4 Organisation of events for sharing knowledge and good practices

Organization of online and on-site events to disseminate good practices, training results, and inspiring case studies from Bulgaria and partner countries. These events will foster collaboration, visibility, and cross-sector partnerships for women entrepreneurs.

Action	Responsible organization	Supportative organization	Time-frame	Budget	Impact
1.1 Acquisition and improvement of circular and digital skills	RAPIV (Women Entrepreneurship Centre)	Universities Smart Varna Successful companies NGOs Chamber of Commerce Industrial Association	yearly	€10.000/Y	10 women entrepreneurs completing the training course per year; Updated training programme in national and English languages 75% satisfaction rate from impact assessment of the trainees
1.2 Organisation of peer-learning circles	RAPIV (Women Entrepreneurship Centre)	Universities Smart Varna Successful companies NGOs Chamber of Commerce Industrial Association Business support organizations	yearly	€5.000/Y	10 women entrepreneurs attending peer-learning per year 10 peers involved 2 peer-sessions
1.3 Expand the WE.Circular Learning Network in Bulgaria	RAPIV (Women Entrepreneurship Centre)	Universities Smart Varna NGOs Chamber of Commerce Industrial Association Business support organizations Local authorities	2026-2028	€2.000	10 new members of the network 1 network meeting per year
1.4 Organisation of events for	RAPIV (Women	Universities	2026-2028	€6.000	6 online/ on-site events

sharing knowledge and good practices	Entrepreneurship Centre)	Smart Varna NGOs Chamber of Commerce Industrial Association Business support organizations Local authorities Successful companies Financial institutions			60 participants 12 good practices/ case studies presented
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Implementation of the actions:

year	Planned activities
2026	Update of the training content for the training programme – adding new modules and materials; translation in English and Bulgarian; Organization of training session First national peer-learning circles; Expansion of WE.Circular learning network; First national event on sharing good practices.
2027	Update of the training content for the training programme – adding new modules and materials; translation in English and Bulgarian; Delivery of next training and peer-learning cycles; Expansion of WE.Circular learning network; Organisation of 1 knowledge-sharing event; Evaluation of training impact.
2028	Update of the training content for the training programme – adding new modules and materials; translation in English and Bulgarian; Organization of training session Peer-learning circles Expansion of WE.Circular learning network; Publication of best practices from Bulgarian members; Organisation of 1 knowledge-sharing event; Assessment of skills improvement and satisfaction rates

4.2 Measure 2: Awareness raising, networking and mentoring for circular women entrepreneurs

Pillars: Measure 2 is contributing to the strategic pillars:

☒ Circular economy transition,

☒ Digital transition

☐ Policy improvement

☒ Smart Specialization

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Limited visibility of women entrepreneurs engaged in circular and digital transformation;
- Lack of structured mentoring and innovation support mechanisms beyond the project lifetime;
- Fragmented communication between academia, business, and policymakers;
- Need for continuous demonstration and testing of circular business models in real-life conditions;
- Insufficient number of trained mentors capable of supporting women entrepreneurs on circular and digital transition topics.

Actions for implementation of Measure 2:

2.1 Operation and replication of the WE.Circular Lab model at a national level.

Ensure the sustainability and replication of the WE.Circular Lab model developed under the project. The Lab will continue operating as a mentoring and innovation environment based on the living-lab approach and will be replicated in other Bulgarian regions through partnerships with universities, business-support organisations, and local authorities. Activities will include advisory sessions for business-model redesign, co-creation workshops, and support for local labs using the same methodology.

2.2 Pilot a “Train-the-Trainer” scheme to build a national pool of mentors

Design and implement a short training and certification programme for future mentors in circular and digital entrepreneurship. The scheme will equip selected experts from academia, business-support organisations, and successful entrepreneurs with mentoring and facilitation skills.

2.3 Organisation of mentoring sessions connected to the training programme, supporting participants in applying digital and circular solutions in their businesses.

Provide continuous mentoring services to women-led enterprises and start-ups for implementation or improvement of circular business models. Each year, at least ten businesses will receive tailored guidance on resource efficiency, digitalisation, and sustainable design

2.4 Application and continuous improvement of the Circular Business Models Toolkit

Support women-led enterprises in applying the practical tools and templates from the Circular Business Models Toolkit. Each year, participating companies will pilot at least one element of the toolkit (e.g. resource mapping, circular value-chain redesign, or business-model innovation canvas) under the guidance of mentors from the WE.Circular Lab. Results and lessons learned will be documented in short business case profiles and integrated into updated versions of the Toolkit. The action will also include regular feedback sessions with entrepreneurs and trainers to ensure that the toolkit remains user-friendly, applicable, and aligned with the needs of Bulgarian SMEs.

2.5 Awareness-raising and networking activities

Organise events, webinars, and media campaigns promoting the benefits of circular transformation and the success stories of mentored companies. Encourage policy dialogue among business, academia, NGOs, and local authorities.

Action	Responsible organization	Supportative organization	Time-frame	Budget	Impact
2.1 Operation and multiplication of the WE.Circular Lab model at a national level	RAPIV (WE.Circular Lab)	Universities Smart Varna Companies NGOs Business support organizations	2026-2028	€1.000	WE.Circular Lab model replicated in ≥ 2 regions; 30+ WEs supported nationally; 1 annual WE.Circular Lab Report

Action	Responsible organization	Supportative organization	Time-frame	Budget	Impact
2.2 Pilot a "Train-the-Trainer" scheme to build a national pool of mentors	RAPIV (Women Entrepreneurship Centre)	Universities Smart Varna Successful companies NGOs Chamber of Commerce Industrial Association Business support organizations	2026-2028	€5.000	10 mentors trained and certified; national pool of mentors established;
2.3 Organisation of mentoring sessions	RAPIV (WE.Circular Lab)	Universities Smart Varna NGOs Chamber of Commerce Industrial Association Business support organizations Local authorities	yearly	€3.000	10 women entrepreneurs mentored per year; 10 mentors engaged; ≥ 70 % of mentees report business-model improvement
2.4 Implementation and continuous improvement of the Circular Business Models Toolkit	RAPIV (WE.Circular Lab)	Universities Smart Varna NGOs Chamber of Commerce Industrial Association Business support organizations Local authorities Successful companies Financial institutions	2027-2028	€3.000	Toolkit applied by 20 companies; 10 business cases documented; 1 updated, user-tested version of the Toolkit published by 2028
2.5 Awareness-raising and	Varna University Free	RAPIV	2027-2028	€10.000	6 events (online / on-site);

Action	Responsible organization	Supportative organization	Time-frame	Budget	Impact
networking activities	University of Economics				150 participants; improved visibility of women circular entrepreneurs

Implementation of the actions:

year	Planned activities
2026	<p>Ensure continued operation of the existing WE.Circular Lab in Varna and prepare guidelines for replication.</p> <p>Launch first mentoring cycle</p> <p>Organise two national awareness events.</p> <p>Preparation of the programme for Train-the-Trainer and select mentor candidates.</p>
2027	<p>Initiate activities for replication of the model in new regional labs</p> <p>Continue mentoring and advisory sessions.</p> <p>Start Train-the-Trainer programme and certify mentors.</p> <p>Collect case studies from supported companies for Toolkit update.</p> <p>Organise two awareness and networking events, including one national Lab coordination meeting.</p> <p>Evaluate replication progress and mentor engagement; refine mentoring tools and procedures</p>
2028	<p>Operate the national network of WE.Circular Labs.</p> <p>Publish the updated Circular Business Models Toolkit with Bulgarian examples.</p> <p>Conduct at least two peer-exchange events among regional Labs and mentors to exchange lessons learned.</p> <p>Publish the WE.Circular Lab Annual Report summarising outcomes, good practices, and success stories.</p> <p>Organise a national “Women in Circular Innovation Forum” to promote results and ensure continuity through partnerships and new funding opportunities</p>

4.3 Measure 3: Access to finance and business support for circular and digital transformation

Pillars: Measure 3 is contributing to the strategic pillars:

☒ Circular economy transition,

☒ Digital transition

☐ Policy improvement

☒ Smart Specialization

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Limited access to finance and investment readiness;
- Low financial literacy and limited advisory support;
- Lack of tailored financial instruments for women entrepreneurs;
- Fragmented business-support ecosystem;
- Insufficient integration of financial advisory services within innovation and mentoring structures.

Actions for implementation of Measure 3:

3.1 Establishment of a Women Green Finance Helpdesk

Create a dedicated Helpdesk service to provide information and advisory support for women entrepreneurs on funding opportunities related to digitalisation and circular transition. The Helpdesk will guide beneficiaries through available EU, national, and private financing schemes and support them in preparing project applications and business plans. The WE.Circular Labs as a local interface for providing integrated support could combine mentoring, business-model development, and funding advisory services. Each Lab will host periodic sessions on funding schemes, project development, and partnership building, facilitated by the Women Green Finance Helpdesk

3.2 Development of partnerships with financial institutions for gender-responsive products

Initiate dialogue and partnership agreements with financial institutions, microfinance organisations, business angels and investors to establish a network for providing financial support to women entrepreneurs in sustainable business transformation.

3.3 Organisation of investor and networking events

Host pitching and matchmaking events connecting women entrepreneurs with investors, business angels, and funding institutions. These events will raise visibility and create direct contact between female founders and financial actors interested in sustainable and circular solutions.

3.4 Organisation of financial literacy and investment-readiness training sessions

Deliver workshops and online sessions on topics such as green finance, investment planning, preparing bankable circular projects, and leveraging EU and national funding opportunities.

Action	Responsible organization	Supportative organization	Time-frame	Budget	Impact
3.1 Establishment of a Women Green Finance Helpdesk	Business support organizations WE.Circular Lab	Universities; Fund of Funds; Financial institutions; Business-support organizations Bulgarian Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion Agency	2026-2028	€5.000	Helpdesk operational; 10 women entrepreneurs advised; 5 funding applications supported
3.2 Development of partnerships with financial institutions for gender-responsive products	WE.Circular Lab	Financial institutions Business angels Investors network	2026-2028	€1.500	3 partnership agreements signed; 1 pilot gender-responsive financial product or service provided
3.3 Organisation of investor and networking	Business support organizations	Universities; Chambers of Commerce;	2027-2028	€15.000	3 investor events organised;

events	WE.Circular Lab	Media partners; Investor networks; Financial institutions			120 participants; 10 women-led enterprises connected with investors
3.4 Organisation of financial literacy and investment-readiness training sessions	Business support organizations Universities WE.Circular Lab	Universities; NGOs Financial experts; Chambers of Commerce	2027-2028	€3.500	20 women trained in financial management and investment planning; improved access to funding instruments and project-financing opportunities

Implementation of the actions:

year	Planned activities
2026	<p>Establish the Women Green Finance Helpdesk under the coordination of business-support organisations and in cooperation with the WE.Circular Lab network. Develop operating procedures, advisory templates, and promotional materials for the Helpdesk.</p> <p>Initiate the first consultations with women entrepreneurs. Launch dialogue with financial institutions, investors, and business-angel networks to identify entry points for gender-responsive financial products.</p>
2027	<p>Continue Helpdesk advisory services across the WE.Circular Lab regions and expand outreach.</p> <p>Formalise partnership agreements with financial institutions or investor networks and co-design one pilot financial product targeting women-led circular businesses.</p> <p>Deliver the first cycle of financial literacy and investment-readiness trainings (minimum 10 women trained).</p> <p>Prepare and host the first national investor and networking event, linking entrepreneurs with potential funders.</p> <p>Monitor uptake of the Helpdesk services and collect success stories for communication and replication</p>
2028	<p>Continue Helpdesk advisory services across the WE.Circular Lab regions and expand outreach</p> <p>Deliver an additional cycle of financial-literacy training and personalised advisory sessions.</p> <p>Implement and evaluate the pilot gender-responsive financial product, assessing its accessibility and outcomes.</p> <p>Organise two regional investor events to maintain engagement between women</p>

entrepreneurs, investors, and financial actors.

Produce a Guide to Funding Opportunities for Circular Women Entrepreneurs summarising funding pathways, lessons learned, and partnership models for long-term sustainability

4.4 Measure 4: Policy dialogue and institutional strengthening for gender-sensitive circular transition

Pillars: Measure 4 is contributing to the strategic pillars:

- ☒ Circular economy transition,
- ☒ Digital transition
- ☒ Policy improvement
- ☒ Smart Specialization

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Limited gender mainstreaming in national and regional policies on innovation, digitalisation, and circular economy;
- Weak cooperation between public institutions and other ecosystem actors;
- Low understanding of the legal and regulatory framework related to the circular transition;
- Limited awareness and representation of women entrepreneurs in policy-making and advisory bodies;

Actions for implementation of Measure 4:

4.1 Capacity building for policymakers and public institutions

Organise targeted training and capacity-building sessions for policymakers, regional authorities, and business-support organisations in coordination with the Transnational Policy Learning Centre.

These sessions will use learning tools and materials developed through the TPLC to strengthen understanding of circular economy legislation, innovation support, and

gender-responsive policy design. The goal is to ensure that future regulatory frameworks are clear, predictable, and enabling for new technologies, with specific guidance for improving SME access to resources and finance.

4.2 Increase stakeholder participation in legal and policy review processes

Enhance stakeholder engagement by creating structured opportunities for SMEs, business associations, academia, and women's entrepreneurship networks to provide feedback on existing legal frameworks.

4.3 Organisation of legal and regulatory awareness campaigns for SMEs

Conduct explanatory and awareness campaigns among SMEs to improve understanding of national and EU regulations on circular economy, digitalisation, and sustainability.

The campaigns will use plain-language guides, webinars, and media outreach to explain compliance requirements, funding eligibility, and practical application of legal standards.

Action	Responsible organization	Supportative organization	Time-frame	Budget	Impact
4.1 Capacity building for policymakers and public institutions	RAPIV Educational centre Universities	TPLC; MIG; MEI; Universities; Policy experts; public agencies	2026-2028	€5.000	10 policymakers and institutional representatives trained; improved understanding of circular and digital policy frameworks
4.2 Increase stakeholder participation in legal and policy review processes	RAPIV Business support organizations Women's entrepreneurship organization	MIG; MEI; Business associations; Women's entrepreneurship networks; NGOs Universities Local authorities public agencies	2027-2028	€7.000	20 stakeholders engaged; 1 consultation event organized
4.3 Organisation of legal and	Business support organizations	Universities; local and national	2027-2028	€4.000	2 awareness campaigns

regulatory awareness campaigns for SMEs	Women's organizations	authorities; Chambers of Commerce Industrial Association Media partners public agencies			organised; 100 SMEs reached; improved understanding of compliance, funding, and regulatory obligations
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Implementation of the actions:

year	Planned activities
2026	Elaborate a capacity-building programme for policymakers and institutional representatives based on the Transnational Policy Learning Centre (TPLC) available resources. Update training modules and case studies on gender-responsive, circular, and digital policy frameworks.
2027	Deliver capacity-building sessions for policymakers and public authorities, focusing on predictable regulation, innovation support, and cooperation with SMEs. Organise and coordinate the first stakeholder consultation event to review existing legal and policy frameworks for circular and digital transition. Prepare a summary of findings and recommendations to be shared via the Virtual Policy Toolbox and the TPLC.
2028	Conduct cycle of capacity-building training sessions for policymakers and institutional representatives, focusing on the practical application of lessons learned. Implement two legal and regulatory awareness campaigns for SMEs organised jointly by business-support organisations and women's associations.

5 Monitoring of the Regional Action Plan implementation

The monitoring of the Regional Action Plan (RAP) implementation is an essential process to ensure that planned activities are effectively executed, progress is measured, and corrective actions are taken where necessary.

It will provide regular insights into the achievements, challenges, and lessons learned during the execution of the four measures, ensuring that the RAP remains aligned with the objectives of the WE.Circular project and the evolving national context.

The following **core KPIs** will be monitored to measure progress under each measure:

Measure	KPI
Measure 1 – Building circular and digital skills for women entrepreneurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of women entrepreneurs trained annually. - Number of peer-learning and mentoring sessions conducted. - Number of new Bulgarian members joining the WE.Circular Learning Network. - Satisfaction rate of participants (≥75%).
Measure 2 – Awareness raising, networking and mentoring for circular women entrepreneurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of active WE.Circular Labs (including replications). - Number of mentors trained and certified. - Number of women-led enterprises mentored. - Number of good practices documented and shared.
Measure 3 – Access to finance and business support for circular and digital transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Functionality of the Women Green Finance Helpdesk. - Number of women entrepreneurs receiving advisory services. - Number of partnerships established with financial institutions. - Number of investor events and participants
Measure 4 – Policy dialogue and institutional strengthening for gender-sensitive circular transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of policymakers trained. - Number of stakeholder consultation events organised. - Number of SMEs reached through legal and regulatory awareness campaigns.

Monitoring frequency:

- **Comprehensive evaluation and reporting:** Once per year (December), summarising progress, KPIs, and key findings.
- **Mid-term review:** Conducted in mid-2027, assessing cumulative results and determining if any corrective measures or updates to the RAP are needed.
- **Final evaluation:** Conducted in late 2028, summarising overall performance, sustainability prospects, and policy impact

Monitoring will be implemented by RAPIV with the support of the listed stakeholders under each Measure.

Information will be collected by regular e-mails, provided feedback from the participants in the different initiatives, attendance lists and reports, interviews, and public information available.

If the monitoring process identifies underperformance or KPIs not being met, the following corrective actions will be applied:

1. **Review of the specific measure or action to determine root causes** (e.g., insufficient outreach, budget limitations, or stakeholder engagement).
2. **Adjustment of implementation plans** (e.g., extending timelines, reallocating responsibilities, or introducing additional promotional activities).
3. **Engagement of additional partners or experts to strengthen weak areas** (e.g., trainers, mentors, policy advisors).
4. **Update of the RAP**, if necessary, to realign objectives or adapt to new contextual or policy developments.

6 Recommendations for enhancing long-term impact

The sustainability and transferability of the Bulgarian RAP are crucial to ensure that the results achieved within the WE.Circular project continue to generate tangible benefits beyond the project's lifetime. The long-term impact of the RAP depends on embedding its actions into existing national structures, maintaining partnerships, and continuously updating knowledge and skills in response to emerging challenges in circular and digital transformation.

To secure this continuity, the mechanisms developed under WE.Circular, such as the WE.Circular Labs, Women Green Finance Helpdesk, Learning Network should be institutionalised within established national and regional ecosystems. Their integration into existing frameworks managed by public agencies, innovation centres, and universities will ensure that these tools continue to provide training, mentoring, and advisory services after the project concludes. The Ministry of Innovation and Growth, the Bulgarian Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion Agency, and regional development organisations can play a key role in maintaining these structures as part of their ongoing support for entrepreneurship and innovation.

Long-term policy impact requires strengthening the links between the RAP and Bulgaria's national strategies. The Transnational Policy Learning Centre (TPLC) and the

Virtual Policy Toolbox developed under the project will serve as valuable resources for policymakers, enabling regular access to best practices, legal updates, and circular-economy models. Through these instruments, Bulgarian institutions can continue to exchange experiences with other Danube Region partners, ensuring that the lessons from WE.Circular are reflected in future policy revisions, particularly in the National Industrial Strategy for Manufacturing and Mining 2025-2030 and the Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation (2028–2035).

The continuation of the WE.Circular Learning Network as a national and regional knowledge-exchange hub will be essential for preserving and transferring the expertise gained. The Virtual Toolbox can function as a central repository for methodologies, training materials, and success stories, supporting replication in other regions of Bulgaria and across the Danube Region. This transnational connection will also facilitate cooperation between WE.Circular Labs in different partner countries, encouraging peer learning and joint mentoring initiatives.

Sustaining the momentum also requires the active engagement of stakeholders beyond the project timeline. The National Stakeholder Group can evolve into a permanent consultative platform, meeting periodically to assess progress, discuss new challenges, and align national actions with EU and regional priorities. Collaboration between local authorities, chambers of commerce, business-support organisations, and women's entrepreneurship networks should be further strengthened to co-finance and expand awareness, mentoring, and training activities initiated under the RAP.

Financial sustainability can be achieved by aligning future initiatives with existing funding mechanisms, such as the Programme for Competitiveness and Innovation in Enterprises, Horizon Europe, and future Interreg programmes. In parallel, private-sector partnerships and sponsorships can support ongoing initiatives, while WE.Circular Labs may develop small-scale revenue-generating services, such as consultancy, training packages, or mentoring programmes, to ensure partial self-financing and independence.

Finally, the RAP's impact will rely on continuous monitoring and adaptation. The monitoring system established under the project should remain operational after 2028, coordinated by RAPIV in collaboration with relevant institutions.

The long-term impact of the Bulgarian RAP will be strongly supported by the institutional capacity and ecosystem positioning of RAPIV. As the managing organisation of the Women Entrepreneurship Centre Bulgaria, in partnership with Varna Free

University (VFU), RAPIV ensures that the actions described in this RAP are not project-based, but embedded in a permanent national support structure for women entrepreneurs.

The Women Entrepreneurship Centre and WE.Circular Lab will serve as the operational backbone for implementing Measures 1 and 2, including the continuation of the WE.Circular training programme, mentoring cycles, peer-learning formats, and the operation of the WE.Circular Lab model. Through its academic partnership with VFU and other universities in the region, the Centre will integrate circular and digital entrepreneurship modules into university programmes, executive education formats, and lifelong learning schemes, ensuring continuous knowledge transfer and institutional anchoring.

Furthermore, RAPIV's active participation in the IMPACTA project strengthens the RAP's sustainability and cross-project synergy. Through IMPACTA activities, additional mentoring, innovation support, and ecosystem-building measures will complement and scale the WE.Circular outcomes. This cross-project integration ensures that circular and digital women-led enterprises benefit from a broader regional innovation framework, increased visibility, and extended cooperation networks.

RAPIV also plays a strategic role in supporting businesses, including female-founded companies in agrifood and sustainable sectors. This position enables the RAP to connect women entrepreneurs with European innovation ecosystems, funding instruments, acceleration programmes, and research partnerships under the EIT framework. By aligning RAP actions with EIT Food opportunities, Bulgarian women-led circular enterprises will gain access to international markets, investors, and innovation communities.

Through these interconnected roles RAPIV ensures that the Regional Action Plan is implemented within a stable, multi-level ecosystem that combines training, mentoring, financing, policy dialogue, and European innovation integration. This integrated vision guarantees that the RAP will not remain a standalone strategic document, but will function as a living implementation framework, continuously updated, funded, and embedded within national and European entrepreneurship structures.