



Press Release

Luxembourg, 11 January 2018

JASPERS regional support by the Commission and the EIB needs better targeting, say EU Auditors

An EU initiative managed by the European Investment Bank (EIB) to help Member States apply for Cohesion and Regional Funds suffers from significant weaknesses, according to a new report from the European Court of Auditors. The 'Joint Assistance to Support Projects in European Regions' initiative (JASPERS) contributed to quicker project approval, but could not have an impact on absorption of EU funds, say the auditors. They find that support under JASPERS should be better targeted.

The European Commission and the European Investment Bank set up JASPERS to provide Member States joining after 2004 with independent, free-of-charge advice to help them prepare high-quality proposals for large-scale regional investment projects.

The auditors visited Croatia, Malta, Poland and Romania, and the audit covered the period from 2006 until the end of 2016. They found weaknesses in the definition of JASPERS' main objectives and roles and responsibilities. This resulted in shortcomings in its operations and put accountability at risk.

"JASPERS did not target its assistance sufficiently, which led to a high number of cancelled and suspended assignments", said Oskar Herics, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. "While it was conceived for the 2007 to 2013 period and then extended, it has no clear measurable objectives to show that its purpose has been achieved."

At the start of the 2014-2020 period, JASPERS also began to support delayed major projects, which needed to be carried over from the previous programme period, and encouraged Member States to make increasing use of free-of-charge assistance during project implementation, even though neither was a priority.

There were significant weaknesses in the setting-up of the new independent quality review function for 2014-2020. The fact that the same person was responsible for signing off both the quality reviews and the advisory work detracted from the independence of JASPERS' quality reviews, say the auditors, who noted a high risk of a lack of impartiality in relation to JASPERS' advisory function.

The assistance provided by JASPERS was relatively comprehensive, contributed to quicker project approval, and, in general, had an impact on the quality of the major projects audited. However, the auditors found it to have only little or no impact on the planned scope, results and implementation timeline of these projects. In the period 2007-2013, the Commission needed less time to approve major projects if they had been assisted by JASPERS. But, JASPERS could generally not have an impact on the absorption of EU funds. This was mainly

The purpose of this press release is to give the main messages of the special report by the European Court of Auditors. The full report is on www.eca.europa.eu.

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because implementation delays occurred at project level.

Over time, say the auditors, JASPERS increased its focus on building Member States' administrative capacity. JASPERS' impact on administrative capacity did not result in higher degrees of independence from assistance. National authorities and project beneficiaries both stated that JASPERS had a positive impact on their administrative capacity, but the auditors found no evidence to confirm whether this improvement had actually materialised.

The observed weaknesses, combined with significant shortcomings in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of JASPERS activities, put at risk the successful operation of the initiative, particularly in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

The auditors recommend that the Commission:

- take more control over the strategic planning of JASPERS, allowing it to be phased out when its main objectives have been met;
- take immediate action to mitigate the high risk of a lack of impartiality when JASPERS independently reviews projects which have received advisory support;
- obtain full access to verify the quality of JASPERS' independent review procedures;
- target JASPERS assistance according to the project's development and maintain its focus on advice for major projects;
- integrate JASPERS activities into its own technical assistance strategy;
- adjust JASPERS' capacity-building activities in Member States over time to provide incentives for them to reach a sustainable level of administrative capacity;
- introduce comprehensive monitoring and evaluation;
- ensure JASPERS' costs are reasonable and reflect the actual costs incurred.

Notes to Editors

JASPERS is jointly financed by the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Commission (through the EU budget) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The three partners vote unanimously to take strategic decisions on the direction and supervision of the initiative.

The actual cost of JASPERS, between commencing operations in 2006 and the end of 2016, was about €284 million. Around 79% was funded from the EU budget, the remainder being provided by the other partners in the form of staff assigned to JASPERS. Between 2006 and December 2016, the Commission approved 963 major projects from the 2007-2013 programme period. Of these, around 53 % were supported by JASPERS. The total amount invested in these JASPERS-supported projects was around €77.6 billion; the total EU contribution was €46.2 billion.

JASPERS is managed by a dedicated department at the EIB in Luxembourg. Employing around 124 staff, it has regional offices in Warsaw, Vienna and Bucharest and a branch office in Brussels.

For Croatia and Poland, the European Court of Auditors (ECA) performed its audit in cooperation with their supreme audit institutions (SAIs), which were carrying out their audits of the impact of JASPERS at national level at the same time. The ECA expects to issue a separate, common report with the two SAIs in February 2018.

Special Report No 1/2018: "Joint Assistance to Support Projects in European Regions (JASPERS) - time for better targeting" is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu) in 23 EU languages.