



ECA measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The European Court of Auditors (ECA) has taken the necessary steps to be able to continue providing an effective public audit service in the EU, and to deliver timely audit reports, opinions and reviews during the COVID-19 pandemic, as far as this is possible in these challenging times. At the same time, we express our gratitude to all those who are working to save lives and fight the pandemic, in Luxembourg, in the EU and around the world. We also remain committed to supporting the Luxembourg government's policy on safeguarding public health. We are mitigating the effects of the ongoing health crisis on our staff and have taken precautions to minimise the risk to them and their families.

Press Release

Luxembourg, 23 April 2020

More focus and coordination needed in EU spending for cultural sites, say Auditors

Several European initiatives have been developed to promote cultural sites. But their coordination with funding arrangements is too limited and EU investments lack focus on the preservation and financial sustainability of cultural sites, according to a new report from the European Court of Auditors. In addition, cultural investments are not treated as a priority, but mainly as means of promoting economic objectives, say the auditors.

The EU can be proud of its rich cultural diversity and has put in place a number of initiatives to ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced. Various EU funds may contribute to this end: the most significant one is the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The auditors looked at the effects of such investments and assessed the financial and physical sustainability of a number of sites which had received aid. They reviewed 27 projects in seven Member States: Germany, France, Croatia, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Romania.

"Almost half of cultural sites projects would not have been implemented without EU investments", said Pietro Russo, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. "However, it is unclear what the EU seeks to achieve through its current initiatives, as they suffer from a lack of focus and coordination."

Culture is incorporated, or "mainstreamed", into different strategies and policies at EU level. For the auditors, the coexistence of multiple frameworks with different players and overlapping periods and objectives is overly complex and may be confusing. The auditors also found that EU cultural initiatives have a limited impact on the availability of EU funds. In particular, the participation of cultural sites in EU initiatives is not taken into account by Member States' authorities when funding projects.

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' special report. The full report is available at eca.europa.eu.

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With around €750 million available annually between 2010 and 2017, the ERDF is a significant source of funding for public investments in cultural sites for about a third of EU Member States. However, the cultural dimension is not treated as a priority for ERDF financing, which remains centred on economic and social considerations. Investments in cultural sites are therefore a means to an end, to be funded only when they help to improve economic competitiveness or foster development.

The pre-eminence of economic objectives also means that insufficient attention is given to the sustainability of cultural sites. Currently, if action on a site is not expected to produce economic and social effects, the ERDF cannot fund it even if urgent work is required.

EU cultural sites are generally dependent on public subsidies to operate and finance their investments. However, they have little incentive to increase revenues, the auditors point out. Indeed, the ERDF requirements for revenue-generating projects imply that the higher the net revenues are, the less EU support is given.

All in all, the auditors provide a mixed assessment as far as the effectiveness and sustainability of ERDF projects for cultural sites is concerned.

In order to address the shortcomings identified, the auditors recommend the European Commission should:

- improve the current EU strategic framework for culture within the remit of the Treaties;
- encourage the use of private funds to safeguard Europe's cultural heritage;
- strengthen the financial sustainability of cultural sites funded by the ERDF; and
- take more specific action to preserve heritage sites

Notes to Editors

Special report 08/2020 "EU investments in cultural sites: a topic that deserves more focus and coordination" is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu) in 23 EU languages.

The ECA presents its special reports to the European Parliament and the Council of the EU, as well as to other interested parties such as national parliaments, industry stakeholders and representatives of civil society. The vast majority of the recommendations we make in our reports are put into practice.

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