



## Press Release

Luxembourg, 15 November 2021

### Performance of EU spending programmes: mixed results in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic

The European Commission's reporting on how EU spending programmes perform shows mixed results in different funding areas, and the indicators which measure progress towards targets do not focus enough on results. These are some of the conclusions of the European Court of Auditors, which has published its 2020 report on the performance of a selection of EU spending programmes. Although some of the spending programmes examined were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, in some the available information shows that there has been progress in their performance. The auditors give a fairly positive assessment of the European Commission's (and the co-legislators') ability to use lessons learned from the past implementation of programmes to improve the design and performance of spending programmes for the 2021-2027 period. However, they also stress the need for the Commission to improve the use of impact assessments and follow-up actions arising from evaluations.

The auditors examined whether the Commission, Parliament and Council have used lessons learned (e.g. from evaluations, impact assessments and audits) to improve the design and performance of the new spending programmes for the 2021-2027 period. Based on the indicators submitted for 2020, as well as recent Commission evaluations and complemented by their own audit work, the auditors assessed whether selected programmes in main areas of the budget were on track to meet their objectives.

*"The European Parliament and the Council want to know what results are achieved with the EU budget" said François-Roger Cazala, the ECA Member responsible for coordinating the report. "It is positive to observe that lessons learnt from the past implementation of spending programmes are often used to improve the design and the implementation of future spending programmes. Available information shows progress towards achieving programme objectives in some programmes, but too often it does not focus on results. We also saw evidence of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the performance of some programmes."*

In the area of **Cohesion**, the auditors examined the performance information under the European Social Fund (ESF). They found that the performance framework increased the availability of such information; however, the focus remained on financial inputs and outputs, rather than on results. The targets, which were in a number of cases reduced in 2018 for most performance indicators,

*The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' report on the performance of the EU budget – Status at the end of 2020. The full report is available at [www.eca.europa.eu](http://www.eca.europa.eu).*

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were on track towards being achieved. However, the auditors also noted that ESF-funded activities continue to face difficulties in reaching people who are disconnected from the labour market, such as young people not in education, employment, or training. Some targets, such as the Europe 2020 target for reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU, are unlikely to be met, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The area of **Growth and jobs** was also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions on travel and in-person learning had severely impacted the programme selected for audit in this area, the Erasmus+ programme. The auditors conclude that Erasmus+ is a popular programme, especially benefiting individual participants, but that there is room for improvement, for example in reducing the number of IT tools, making the programme guide easier to understand, simplifying the application procedure, and addressing gender equality. The mobility supported by the programme provides many types of added value, all of which suffered on account of the pandemic. The auditors also found that other actions under the Erasmus+ programme aimed at supporting innovative practices were often successful in their own right, but rarely had an innovative effect beyond the beneficiary organisations.

In the area of **Natural Resources**, the auditors selected the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). The EMFF supports the objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) – objectives such as addressing unsustainable fishing and preventing the degradation of the marine environment. Here as well, the auditors found that the Commission’s performance information for the most part concentrates on the financial contribution of the Fund to the CFP’s objectives, rather than results. Little information was available on the EMFF’s contribution to environmental objectives.

To assess performance in the area of **Global Europe**, the auditors analysed the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance II (IPA II), an instrument which provides pre-accession assistance to candidate countries and potential candidates. The indicators reported by the Commission show a modest performance. Among other things, the auditors found that progress towards political reforms under the instrument had stalled: indicators relating to political reforms had regressed in relation to their baselines, and none of them were on track to reach their target. The auditors conclude that EU support has been more effective in promoting fundamental reforms than in securing their implementation.

In the area of **Security and citizenship**, the auditors analysed the performance of Internal Security Fund Borders and Visa, an instrument which provides support for border measures. They concluded that the indicator measuring progress towards the instrument’s overarching objective was too broadly defined, undermining conclusions on the fund’s overall performance. More specific indicators suggest progress in Visa infrastructure and key IT systems used for border control; however training and capacity-building for consulates and border guards are lagging behind, which can be partially attributed to the COVID pandemic.

For the overall **Performance framework**, the auditors found that the Better Regulation framework is helpful in identifying lessons learned and ensuring that they are applied in the design of future programmes. The “evaluate first” principle, which is a part of the Better Regulation framework, is applied fairly consistently, though not always. The auditors’ overall conclusion is that lessons learned are generally well identified and taken on board in subsequent legislative proposals. The

auditors recommend that the Commission should improve its impact assessments and clearly identify relevant follow-up actions arising from evaluations

The European Court of Auditors' report on the performance of the EU budget, as well as a summary document, "*2020 performance report in brief*", are available on the [ECA website](#) in English. Other language versions will follow shortly.

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