



Press Release

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EU institutions generally well equipped to deal with unethical conduct, but rules should be further improved, say Auditors

Overall, the European Parliament, Council and Commission have put in place adequate ethical frameworks, according to a new report from the European Court of Auditors. But the auditors also identified certain areas where the coverage, specificity, clarity and level of guidance could be improved and harmonised, as well as examples of best practice. In addition, staff awareness and perception of the ethical framework and culture should be strengthened, say the auditors.

Ethical frameworks are intended to help ensure that unethical behaviours are prevented, identified and dealt with correctly. In the EU institutions, provisions on ethics apply to both staff and elected or appointed members, such as Members of the European Parliament or Commissioners. They concern policies on gifts and entertainment, outside activities or assignments, conflicts of interests, activities after the end of employment or a mandate at an EU institution, harassment and whistleblowing.

The auditors assessed whether the ethical frameworks of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission were well established. In particular, they examined their legal ethical requirements and the procedures for enforcing them. They also carried out a survey to assess awareness among staff. At this stage, however, they did not look at how the ethical frameworks had been implemented.

“Any unethical behaviour, or even the perception thereof, by Members or staff of the EU institutions attracts high levels of public interest and reduces trust in the EU”, said Mihails Kozlovs, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. “Our audit will help EU institutions to further improve their ethical frameworks and reduce to a minimum the risk of unethical behaviour.”

The auditors acknowledge that essential elements of ethical frameworks are present in all three institutions. They have established policies that meet the main requirements, and their ethical frameworks are duly supported by investigative and sanction mechanisms.

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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At the same time, the auditors identified certain areas for improvement. For instance, they note that procedures for verifying declarations by staff and Members are not sufficiently formalised. Also, the ethical framework regarding conflicts of interests is largely based on self-declarations and lacks adequate guidance and standardised procedures for checking the accuracy, reliability or completeness of such declarations.

The auditors further found areas with scope for harmonisation and for more sharing of best practice. For example, the value below which staff may accept gifts without first obtaining permission is different across EU institutions, even though the staff of these institutions are subject to the same employment rules. In addition, the Council still lacks a common ethical framework governing the work of Member States' representatives.

Finally, the auditors carried out a survey to obtain insight into ethical culture among EU staff. The results present a mixed picture of their awareness and perception of ethical matters. Most staff believe that they can recognise unethical behaviour when they spot it, even though only a minority have received training on ethics. At the same time, the survey showed that some are hesitant about reporting unethical conduct.

To better address the challenges identified, the auditors make a number of recommendations. In particular, the EU institutions should:

- further improve their ethical frameworks;
- work together to harmonise elements of their ethical frameworks and make further efforts to share good practice; and
- improve staff awareness and perception of their ethical framework and culture.

Notes to Editors

Legal ethical requirements in the EU institutions address a number of key issues, such as various forms of conflict of interest (including those concerning recruitment and post-employment activities, gifts and entertainment, outside activities and spouse's employment), transparency, anti-harassment and enforcement mechanisms.

Special report 13/2019 "The ethical frameworks of the audited EU institutions: scope for improvement" 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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