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Resilience of the EU institutions during the COVID-19 crisis

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When a crisis hits, societies and organisations are forced to react to keep functioning. Resilient organisations can become stronger if they use the experience they acquire during the crisis to reduce their vulnerability to subsequent ones.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects on the working of the EU institutions. The European Court of Auditors is carrying out an audit on how resilient the EU institutions have proven when faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they are learning from the crisis.

This audit is part of a series of audits carried out by the European Court of Auditors to assess the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in the EU.

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Resilience

When a crisis hits, societies and organisations are forced to react to keep functioning. The COVID-19 pandemic required organisations across the world to adapt their working methods to remain operational.

“Resilience” is the capacity of a society or an organisation to absorb the negative impacts produced by an emergency or disaster such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It also describes the ability of societies and organisations to recover after the crisis has abated. Resilient organisations and societies can use the experience they acquired during the crisis to grow stronger, and to reduce their vulnerability to such events in the future.

The EU institutions’ response to the COVID-19 crisis

The EU institutions are no exception: they were forced to react and adapt to the new circumstances brought about by the pandemic. The institutions had already been confronted with health and safety crises in the recent past: the EU delegations had to deal with the Ebola outbreak in 2014, and Brussels-based institutions had to respond to the terrorist attacks of 2016. Nevertheless, the scale and duration of the COVID-19 crisis has been unprecedented. Their response to the crisis has included the following elements.

- Governance and policy: adapting work programmes to reflect new tasks and reassessment of priorities.
- Workforce management: alternative solutions to physical work presence and changes in the availability of staff.
- IT equipment, software, infrastructure and information workflows: availability of laptops and other teleworking solutions, remote decision-making procedures, maintenance of the confidentiality of information.
- Buildings and infrastructure: keeping buildings operational, ensuring physical security and management of access to premises.

The institutions also had to take into account the fact that not all countries where they had offices reacted in the same way. For example, in addition to Brussels and Geel in Belgium, the Commission’s Joint Research Centre has offices in Italy (Ispra), Spain

(Seville), Germany (Karlsruhe) and the Netherlands (Petten), and all these countries had different approaches to the pandemic.

The disaster management cycle

The disaster management cycle is relevant when assessing the resilience of an organisation to an emergency. The cycle has four phases: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. “Prevention” is less relevant to a pandemic caused by a new virus, but preparedness, response, and recovery remain valid (see Figure 1). The “recovery” phase includes the incorporation of lessons learned from the crisis into an organisation’s everyday working.

Figure 1 – Disaster management cycle



Source: European Court of Auditors.

To provide a structured approach to this cycle, the EU institutions have had business continuity plans in place since the 2000s. The institutions also conduct regular risk assessments. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, the institutions were forced to react quickly and put their business continuity plans into practice.

Roles and responsibilities

Each EU institution operates independently. When it comes to workforce management, they are largely autonomous within a common regulatory framework set out in the Staff Regulations of Officials and the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Union. Issues such as business continuity plans, risk assessments, IT security, working conditions and building management are governed by each institution's internal rules. Inter-institutional cooperation is organised through various committees where each institution's heads of administration or human resources senior management officials meet.

Focus of the audit

The ECA is auditing the resilience of the EU institutions to the COVID-19 pandemic. The audit covers the three institutions which make up the legislative and executive branches of the EU (the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission) as well as the EU's judiciary power (the European Court of Justice).

We are examining whether the EU institutions:

- followed recognised standards in their preparedness plans;
- were able to function and fulfil their respective mandates and accommodate new challenges triggered by the COVID-19 crisis;
- are better prepared for the post COVID-19 environment.

Our audit includes checks on how the institutions' response developed throughout the crisis, and how lessons are being learned for the post-pandemic environment.

This audit is part of a series of audits carried out by the European Court of Auditors to assess the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in the EU. Other work focuses on the EU policy response; this audit will look at the EU institutions – the enablers of this response – themselves.

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