Press Release

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Facilitating travel during the pandemic: the EU Digital COVID certificate worked, other tools less so

The EU Digital COVID Certificate helped to coordinate travel restrictions between EU countries and was effective in facilitating travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of other EU tools, however, was modest, a report published today by the European Court of Auditors concludes. The European Commission moved fast to propose suitable technological solutions, the auditors found. But EU countries' use of these tools varied significantly, so their impact in terms of facilitating travel was uneven. The auditors call on the EU to prepare itself better, so that it can face potential future emergencies more successfully.

In March 2020, shortly after the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in Europe, EU countries started imposing border controls and travel restrictions. Despite its limited competence in public health policy, the European Commission took various initiatives to limit the impact of these measures on free movement. In particular, it developed a number of tools to facilitate travel and to help trace positive COVID-19 cases. These included a contact-tracing gateway, digital passenger locator forms and a platform for EU Member States to exchange them, and the EU Digital COVID Certificate. The EU provided €71 million for the development of these IT tools.

The auditors found that the European Commission had mobilised funding quickly and taken a pragmatic approach to developing the tools under time constraints. The contact-tracing gateway started functioning just seven months after the pandemic began, while the EU Digital Certificate was completed before the EU countries had finished their vaccination plans. In contrast, passenger locator forms were developed too late, since some national solutions had already been made available earlier. The auditors also note that the European Commission did not manage to overcome certain Member States' reservations in using the EU tools due to data protection and other legal concerns, and also because they had already developed their own national tools. Generally, though, the Commission addressed data protection concerns and applied good IT security practices.

"*It was crucial that all EU countries adopt common tools to coordinate free movement restrictions and facilitate travel despite the unprecedented situation we were faced with*", said Baudilio Tomé Muguruza, the ECA member responsible for the audit. "*Not all EU tools were taken up by Member States, and the success of the EU Digital COVID Certificate was not reflected in other tools.*"

ECA Press

12, rue Alcide De Gasperi – L-1615 Luxembourg
E: press@eca.europa.eu   @EUAuditors   eca.europa.eu

Only four Member States used the EU digital passenger locator form and, of almost 27 million forms issued by February 2022, over 9 in 10 were issued by a single EU country, Italy. Similarly, the exchange platform was hardly used at all, with only 256 by the end of February 2022 (all but one from Spain). The uptake of contact-tracing applications varied significantly: by May 2022, the bulk of data on the gateway (83 %) was generated by users from Germany alone. In practice, the EU Digital COVID Certificate was the only tool used in all Member States, and even by 45 non-EU countries and territories. More than 1.7 billion certificates had been issued by the end of March 2022. The auditors conclude that only the EU Digital COVID Certificate helped to coordinate travel restrictions between EU countries and was effective in facilitating travel during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, the audit flags up the lack of specific procedures for the use of these tools in the longer term, or for re-activating them quickly in the event that they are needed again. For instance, the current legal basis for the EU Digital COVID Certificate expires in June this year; if it is renewed, it will be through the standard EU legislative procedure.

Background information

This audit covers the period from October 2020 to June 2022 and focuses on the four EU tools listed above, including the associated EU funding. It does not cover EU funding for COVID-19 vaccination, which was previously assessed in special report on the EU's COVID-19 vaccine procurement.

This audit complements ECA special report on the right of free movement in the context of the COVID-19 crisis (issued in June 2022), which looked at Schengen border controls during the pandemic.

Special report 01/2023, "*Tools facilitating travel within the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic – Relevant initiatives with impact ranging from success to limited use*", is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu).

Press contact

ECA press office: press@eca.europa.eu
- Vincent Bourgeais: vincent.bourgeais@eca.europa.eu – M: (+352) 691 551 502
- Damijan Fišer: damijan.fiser@eca.europa.eu – M: (+352) 621 552 224
- Claudia Spiti: claudia.spiti@eca.europa.eu – M: (+352) 691 553 547