

ECA Gives Advice on Future EU Cohesion Policy

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News

In its review "The Future of EU Cohesion Policy: Drawing lessons from the past", the European Court of Auditors (ECA) makes several proposals on how the EU's post-2027 budget on cohesion can be better designed, implemented, managed and overseen. The review, issued on 19 June 2025, is the ECA's contribution to the discussion of the next long-term EU budget in the area of cohesion.

The ECA notes that the EU invested more than €1 trillion through its cohesion policy between 1989 and 2023 and an additional €400 billion will be allocated until 2027. The cohesion policy is the largest regional development policy of its kind in the world, and accounts for around one third of the EU budget. The aim of the cohesion funds is to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion, and reduce disparities in the EU. Cohesion is delivered via the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, and the Just Transition Fund.

The ECA also points out that EU cohesion policy has had to cover an ever-increasing set of EU priorities and objectives. Given the significant resources available for the policy, it has also often been used to respond to exceptional situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the massive flow of refugees from Ukraine in 2022. The auditors acknowledge the importance of flexibility in using the cohesion funds, but they warn that this makes cohesion policy more fragmented, and risks diversion from its primary goal of reducing regional disparities. Hence, the design of the cohesion policy objectives in the future should remain rooted in each region's development needs, and continue the focus on strengthening economic and social convergence. Fragmentation and complexity should be reduced and synergies between cohesion and directly-managed programmes supported, particularly by aligning regulatory provisions such as requirements for public procurement and state aid rules.

Furthermore, the ECA suggests that performance monitoring and evaluation should be strengthened if the "performance-based" model will be continued. Auditors also raise the issue that the speed of fund absorption in cohesion policy should be improved, e.g. by adopting the legal frameworks with as little delay as possible and by establishing a faster programming exercise. Other issues that should be addressed are: reducing the complexity of rules in order to avoid risks of error and making the assurance framework more effective.

Last but not least, the auditors stress that lessons must be learned from the shortcomings of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). This includes: putting in place appropriate accountability arrangements; reinforcing control systems to ensure compliance with EU and national rules; and ensuring effective arrangements for the recovery of misused funds.

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