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Press Release

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European External Action Service not living up to its potential, say EU Auditors

A report published today by the European Court of Auditors (ECA) suggests that the European External Action Service (EEAS) should increase its efficiency and do more for the EU and its citizens.

“The establishment of the EEAS took place in a difficult start-up environment - during a time of financial constraints and of increasing turmoil close to the EU’s borders,” stated **Mr Szabolcs Fazakas, the ECA Member responsible for the report**, *“The EEAS is an operational foreign service of the EU, but it could work better with more efficient financial and administrative arrangements, and closer cooperation with the Member States’ diplomatic corps.”*

The Lisbon Treaty created the position of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy with the aim of enhancing foreign policy coordination and promoting basic values of the European Union all over the world. The High Representative is also Vice President of the Commission and is supported by a new EU diplomatic corps, the EEAS. With the establishment of the EEAS, the EU now has an operational foreign policy service equipped with policy desks and crisis management structures, a wide network of diplomatic posts and a balanced presence of different sources of staff.

The EEAS became formally operational on 1 January 2011. It is headquartered in Brussels and has a global network of 140 delegations to represent the interests of the whole EU. For 2014, the EEAS has a budget of €519 million which is split between headquarters (41%) and delegations (59%). The Commission tops up the delegations’ budget with approximately €270 million annually as they host a significant number of Commission staff, most working on the implementation of EU development and humanitarian aid, enlargement, and external dimensions of the internal policies for which the Commission is responsible.

The EU’s auditors found that coordination between the EEAS and the Commission was only partly effective. This was mainly due to ineffective cooperation mechanisms at top level and a rigid financial and administrative framework at the delegations, which takes resources away from political tasks. The coordination with Member States improved, although it can be further developed to exploit synergies such as information sharing or co-location, and consular services, including protection of EU citizens.

Notes to the editors:

The purpose of this press release is to give the main messages of the special report adopted by the European Court of Auditors. The full report is on www.eca.europa.eu

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European Court of Auditors (ECA) special reports are published throughout the year, presenting the results of selected audits of specific EU budgetary areas or management topics.

This special report (No 11/2014) entitled “The establishment of the European External Action Service”, assessed whether the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) was adequately prepared; the resources of the EEAS were prioritised, organised and allocated efficiently; and the EEAS has coordinated effectively with the Commission and the Member States?

This report is the result of an independent assessment of the establishment of the EEAS. The ECA’s audit took place at the same time as the preparation of the EEAS mid-term review. The auditors’ findings and recommendations are generally in line with the EEAS self-assessment, which reinforces the need to address the weaknesses identified.

The EU auditors found the establishment of the EEAS was rushed and inadequately prepared. It took place during a time of financial constraints and of increasing turmoil in the Southern Mediterranean. At the same time, the set-up of the service was beset by too many constraints and vaguely defined tasks. These factors contributed towards a difficult start-up environment.

Weaknesses in the prioritisation, organisation and allocation of resources have reduced the EEAS’s efficiency. The integration of the EU special representatives within the work of the EEAS is not sufficient. As regards recruitment, the auditors found that significant gender and geographical imbalances have not yet been fully corrected and that the recruitment procedures are costly and lengthy.

Finally, the ECA concluded that coordination with the Commission and Member States has improved, but is still insufficient for the EEAS to fulfil its potential. Coordination with the Commission was affected by the EEAS being a separate body, the absence of effective cooperation at top level and a rigid financial and administrative framework at delegations, which takes resources away from political tasks. Coordination with Member States does not fully exploit synergies, such as information sharing or co-location, and does not cover consular services, including the protection of EU citizens abroad. Having the EEAS as permanent chair of some Council preparatory bodies has facilitated coordination but the potential benefits of the new arrangements have not been fully realised.

The report sets out a number of recommendations to enhance the EEAS’s added value and efficiency, such as clarifying its tasks and objectives, streamlining its organisational design, simplifying its administrative framework, strengthening its strategic role and developing its planning. The report also recommends reviewing the appointment process and functioning of EU special representatives and EEAS recruitment procedures. The EEAS should work with the Commission to mitigate the impact of the rigidity of its financial and staff regulations on the efficiency of EU delegations. Finally, the EEAS should continue its efforts to promote information sharing and co-location with Member States; and should assess the opportunity to offer consular services, including the protection of EU citizens.

A short video interview with the ECA Member responsible for the report is available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/user/EUAuditorsECA>

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