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WORKING DOCUMENT

on ECA Special Report 14/2018 (Discharge2017): The EU Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Centres of Excellence: more progress needed

Committee on Budgetary Control

Rapporteur: Zigmantas Balčytis

Introduction

Since 2010, the EU has sought to mitigate chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) risks from beyond its borders through the EU CBRN Centres of Excellence Initiative (“the Initiative”). It is the EU’s largest civilian external security programme and is financed through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace with a budget of €130 million for the years 2014-2020. The Initiative is one of the main tools¹ to mitigate CBRN threats and risks from outside the EU.

The Initiative’s main objective is to strengthen the long-term capacity of, and to foster long lasting cooperation among the national and regional authorities, and administrative bodies responsible for tackling CBRN threats. The Initiative mainly finances capacity-building projects but the benefits are not limited to projects. Its main feature is to establish and consolidate CBRN networks (or Centres of Excellence) of cooperation between and within partner countries. The network is organised around regional secretariats where knowledge and expertise is shared.

Conclusions of the Court

The Initiative is the EU’s largest civilian external security programme. Overall, the Court concluded that the Initiative has contributed to mitigating CBRN threats, but that many challenges remain.

The Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) have fully implemented three out of six of the recommendations, contained in the Court’s special report 17/2014, and partially implemented two of them:

- partner countries are now more involved in the initiation and implementation of projects,
- the organization at regional level has been strengthened and
- cooperation between decision makers and implementing bodies has improved;
- while some progress has been made, the role of the EU delegations and the speed of project implementation are still not satisfactory and, in addition
- the Court’s earlier recommendation, which proposed to concentrate EU funding in the areas most relevant to EU security and was accepted by the Commission, has not been implemented.

The Court regretted that an adequate risk management approach to the activities of the Initiative has not yet been developed for the Initiative as a whole, at the project selection stage and for the identification of partner countries’ needs.

When the Commission provides partner countries with tools and a methodology to help them assess their own needs and develop national action plans to mitigate CBRN risks, not sufficient guidance is given as to how risks should be identified and prioritised. Despite this drawback, the needs assessment questionnaire and national action plan are still key elements that underpin the Initiative. However, the Commission cannot respond quickly enough to

meet all partner countries' requests for assistance in identifying and prioritising their needs; and this risk to seriously delay the preparation of both the questionnaires and the action plans.

Whereas the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) accepted most recommendations, they disagree with the Court's comments in relation to the non-implementation of the recommendation to concentrate EU funding in areas most relevant for EU security. They underlined that the Initiative should be seen as a long-term effort to build effective regional CBRN risk mitigation capacities. The Commission was also of the opinion that the assessment of whether the present recommendation should be considered fulfilled or not should be based on a more complex and composite definition of "areas most relevant to EU Security", taking into account the nature and scope of CBRN risks and threats, as well as the fundamental features of the CBRN Centres of Excellence Initiative.

The Rapporteur's recommendations

- Welcomes the Court's special report and notes with satisfaction that the Court, the Commission and the EEAS agree on most of the recommendations;

Prioritising activities on the basis of a systemic risk assessment

- Calls on the Commission and the EEAS carry out a joint EU analysis identifying external CBRN risks to the EU to comprehensively link internal and external action:
- Calls on the Commission to embed systemic risk assessments into the needs assessment and national action plan methodologies and to respond quickly to all partner countries requesting assistance to finalise their needs assessment and national action plan exercises;

Strengthening the Initiative's regional dimension

- Calls on the Commission to increase the number of regional activities, such as field and table-top exercises;

Strengthening the EU delegations' role in the Initiative

- Calls on the Commission and the EEAS to assign CBRN responsibilities to designated focal points and/or to "Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace" (IcSP) long-term regional cooperation officers in all the EU delegations, and to include CBRN in the policy, security and political dialogue;

Identifying potential synergies and other available funding sources

- Calls on the DG DEVO of the Commission and the EEAS should to work together with other relevant Commission Directorates-General, in particular with DG NEAR, as well as with other donors in order to identify potential synergies and available funding sources which could be better used to support CBRN activities;

Increasing accountability and visibility of activities and results through improved monitoring and evaluation

- Calls on the Commission to translate the Initiative's overall objective into more specific objectives that can be used at project level, enabling results to be measured from the project level up to the national, regional and Initiative-wide level;
- Calls on the Commission to also define outcome and impact indicators allowing the Initiative's effectiveness to be assessed against the set objectives;

Overhauling the web-based portal to allow easy access to all the information concerning the Initiative's activities

- Calls on the Commission to ensure that all relevant information is available on its web-based portal with the appropriate levels of access authorisation; and to guarantee best practices and guidelines are accessible through the CBRN portal.