

Role and Effectiveness

*Outline of EUROSAI member SAIs' challenges
and examples of responses to the
COVID-19 pandemic impact*



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EUROSAI Project Group on COVID-19 / Workstream B1

In January and February 2021, a survey among the EUROSAI members was conducted, and workstream B1 design team looked at the impact aspects of SAI's work effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic based on the replies received from 32 SAIs¹ (64% of EUROSAI members) and identified whether any changes had taken place and how significant they were.

This document outlines challenges that EUROSAI member SAIs faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and provides an overview of the practices and examples, including the communication approaches that SAIs could use to safeguard the role of representing the public interest in an emergency.

The results and interpretation were directly dependent on the information provided by surveyed SAIs and does not guarantee a complete outline of the situation throughout all EUROSAI member countries. However, this document gives an insight of surveyed SAIs challenges and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic impact.

'DESIGN TEAM' OF WORKSTREAM B1:

SAIs of Latvia, Finland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.



¹ SAIs of Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, European Court of Auditors, France, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Moldova, The Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovenia, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

Table of Content

Introduction	4
1. Legal and institutional framework	5
2. Internal change to the SAI’s performance in response to the COVID-19.....	9
3. Specific management decisions made to support SAI’s reaction to the COVID-19 impact	13
4. HR planning and management during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	19
5. Support to the staff in adapting to working environment imposed by COVID-19.....	24
6. Competencies of auditors and auditees during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	27
7. Cooperation with stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	28
8. Rearrangements in communication processes according to the COVID-19 pandemic situation.....	30
9. SAIs’ response to the need of communication enhancement and/or communication approach change during the COVID-19 pandemic	32

Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic situation worldwide, including Europe, is unprecedented and requires a solid response from public institutions, ensuring crucial functions both nationally and regionally. SAIs are also facing challenges, and their daily work has been affected by the current situation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying the scope of changes, newly introduced processes, and innovative techniques and sharing them are important while not the only ‘must do’ activity. Assessing the effectiveness of SAIs’ interventions is equally crucial. We must obtain assurance that the measures implemented by SAIs achieve their objectives, SAIs have provided due support, SAIs’ role is strengthened, the public has appreciated the actions SAIs had undertaken, they are sustainable and effective, and SAIs are able to demonstrate their ongoing relevance to citizens, Parliament, and other stakeholders in the new circumstances.

Surveyed EUROSAI member SAIs have identified several challenges during the pandemic while showing ability to address them and adapt to the new conditions at the same time.

The main challenges highlighted by the survey results were:

- 1) Ensuring that SAIs’ staff were safe and could continue to work remotely.
- 2) Revising audit plans and to continue SAIs audit activity, while adapting programming in relation to the subject of the COVID-19 pandemic expenditures, to make relevant recommendations to the administration.
- 3) Having the technology in place to work remotely.
- 4) Ensuring audit activities off-site and obtaining audit evidence remotely.
- 5) Staff management including reduction of adverse effects on their motivation and engagement while working remotely.
- 6) Internal communication and adoption of internal procedures and regulations.
- 7) Remote information access and assurance of sensitive and classified information security.

Furthermore, for the public administration, society, and stakeholders to have the perception that they can rely on the SAIs role even in exceptional circumstances, communication has become a fundamental aspect. The creation of a specific section dedicated to COVID-19 issues on the SAIs websites was one of the measures adopted in this context.

COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the planned transition to digitalized working methods and remote auditing in most of SAIs, which is a precondition to be able solving the tasks within SAIs mandate.

In this document, we have summarised surveyed EUROSAI member state SAIs’ challenges and examples for addressing them.

1. Legal and institutional framework

The existing legal framework in the EUROSAI member states is adequate and generally supports the effective operation of the SAIs in auditing not only in standard situations, but also in crises.

In general, EUROSAI member states' legal framework provides sufficient support for crises. However, the crisis also highlighted the duration of the audit, which can be viewed as problematic during the pandemic.

Due to a large degree of decentralisation of public administration in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the National Audit Office has very limited mandate when it comes to crisis-related programs. These are covered by sub-national audit office, which lacks audit capacities to be effective also due to existing legal framework. On the other hand, the Electronic Signature Act has never been implemented by posing additional limitations for electronic operations of both the SAI and the auditees.

The Auditor General of SAO of North Macedonia made several initiatives to propose amendments in accounting-related laws to define documentation, which was the basis for entries in the general ledger/ accounting books.

There are weaknesses in access to electronic data, i.e., in direct access to databases containing the data required by the auditors. In several member states, there is a lack of legal regulation in individual areas to allow auditors to connect to the databases and IT systems directly. In such situations, SAIs are dealing with this through separate agreements with auditees and other institutions.

In crises, specific regulations are needed to facilitate access to the databases and IT systems of the auditees, including those of a personal nature.

Meanwhile, not all member states have financial independence secured in their national legislation what remains as affecting obstacle also during the pandemic.



Legal and institutional framework did not affect SAIs' work in general during the pandemic.



In some cases, legal framework is limiting remote access to the databases and IT systems of the auditees.

Changes to the existing legal framework facilitated audit work during the COVID-19 pandemic

In general, not all EUROSAI member SAIs have a legislative initiative rights, therefore adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic circumstances was ensured within existing legal framework in most cases. Meanwhile, special regulations were issued in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic measures in some member states, for instance, to extend the period given to auditees for responding to draft audit reports.

Several SAIS, however, did change internal procedures and regulations by defining work organisation of the SAI during the COVID-19 pandemic circumstances.

Such measures ensured the continuity of the audit activities/the performance of the audit missions by requesting and obtaining audit evidence.

Availability and openness of auditees in SAI audits during the COVID-19 pandemic

Among EUROSAI member states, some of the entities, which work on the front lines in fighting the pandemic, have severely restricted SAIs' access to their offices or access to the information due to their busy agendas and other priorities. There have been cases where auditors have found it difficult themselves to carry out audit procedures because the specific nature of the audit required the procedures to be carried out on the spot, i.e., by auditing routine processes. In other cases, the auditees did their best to provide information, but slower access to information affected some audits.

The extent, to which COVID-19 pandemic impacts the SAIs auditors' works, differ from one entity to another.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, government entities were also (to a large extent) working remotely – many were involved in responding to the pandemic. For many SAIs, this required constant client negotiation at all levels of the organisations. The auditees are also struggling with a direct COVID-19 pandemic impact. Most of their employees work remotely or have been affected by the COVID-19 infection. This leads to delays in the provision of information. Communication is challenging given the restrictions imposed.

Considering the circumstances caused by the COVID-19 situation, it was essential to ensure that audit work was carried out with due regard to the primary concern of the audited administrations and bodies in order not to create burdens or constraints that would interfere with their primary tasks.



COVID-19 pandemic conditions affected the availability and openness of auditees adversely.

In some cases, on-site audits were reduced or cancelled depending on the respective situation. Most of the information flow was digital (including virtual meetings).

Despite the challenges, most of SAIs ensured that the necessary effort has been made to collect sufficient and adequate audit evidence and to produce qualitative audit reports.

Quality of the information produced for SAIs by the auditees compared to the pre-pandemic period

There was no material difference other than some obvious difficulties in the availability/timely provision of information due to the specific conditions of the COVID-19 in comparison to the pre-pandemic period. The results of EUROSAI member SAIs survey show that the quality of the information produced by the auditees was not affected in general.

In some cases, information transparency increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as many government agencies were producing information regarding the COVID-19 situation actively and regularly.

Obtaining, exchange, use, and transfer of sensitive information during the COVID-19 pandemic

While encryption of sensitive data transferred online is standard procedure in most cases, some issues regarding the availability of information remained due to government entities (to a large extent) working remotely. Many were involved in responding to the pandemic, and on-site auditing was not possible, therefore modified use of remote working and remote data transfer protocols were applied.

Depending on the subjects audited and the operational urgency of the administrations, there have been slowdowns in obtaining, exchanging, using, and transferring sensitive information.

When the pandemic began, there were some difficulties identified among the EUROSAI member SAIs especially related to the audits in the defence sector. Some of the audits were postponed or cancelled, which had to be backed up by classified information. The information required for audit evidence was classified and very sensitive, which prevented proper auditing in the context of COVID-19 and remote working circumstances.

However, the situation has stabilized, procedures for obtaining information are in place, and the most of SAIs have taken measures for a more secure exchange of sensitive information currently.



The quality of the information produced by the auditees was not affected in general during the COVID-19 pandemic.



COVID-19 pandemic conditions slowed down obtaining, exchanging, using, and transferring sensitive information in some SAIs.

Based on the need to secure sensitive/personal information, especially in the context of electronic communication, each party (the Court of Accounts of Moldova and the auditees) used reasonable procedures to check the most known computer viruses before sending information in an electronic format. The Court of Accounts of Moldova has informed the entities that each party will be responsible for protecting its own systems and interests in relation to electronic communication and they will not be liable to each other for any error, damage, loss, or omission resulting from/or in connection with the electronic communication of information between both entities. Under these conditions, the Court of Accounts informs the auditees that it guarantees the processing of information containing personal data correctly and in accordance with the provisions of laws.

2. Internal change to the SAI's performance in response to the COVID-19

Introduction of new and specialised products

During the pandemic, the legal framework and the existing products of EUROSAI member state SAIs were sufficient in general to report on the issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the legal framework of some SAIs does not define other products than audit reports, there is limitation of introduction of specialised reports or non-audit related products. SAIs with broader mandate have adjusted their audit plans, for instance, including more performance audits and assessments of a narrower scope and shorter timeframe. In addition, some SAIs have prepared monitoring reports or a special report on the management of public resources during the state of emergency. Visualizations of economic developments (budgets) and information in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic response expenditures have been published in special blogs and SAIs' website.

In April 2020, the UK NAO undertook a detailed assessment of the value for money risks that the COVID-19 pandemic could represent. After careful consideration of the results, and consulting key stakeholders, the UK NAO developed a specific COVID-19 work programme. The programme was designed in three phases, comprising a mix of audit approaches (e.g. Value for Money and Investigations reports, as well as overviews and an online cost-tracker). Further details of the UK NAO's audit response to the COVID-19 pandemic can be found in the Workstream B2 BIEP area.

Current situation in some countries required additional pre-study on the COVID-19 pandemic impact, which was used as a basis for planning audits in 2021 and further on.

The SAIs have regularly used mass media to inform public about COVID-19 related challenges (including information other than audits).

During the pandemic, SAIs were using mass media routinely about audit results including information about COVID-19 related audits. SAIs were publishing information on their actions taken in connection with the pandemic regularly and continuously on their official websites.



SAIs have introduced new and specialised products.



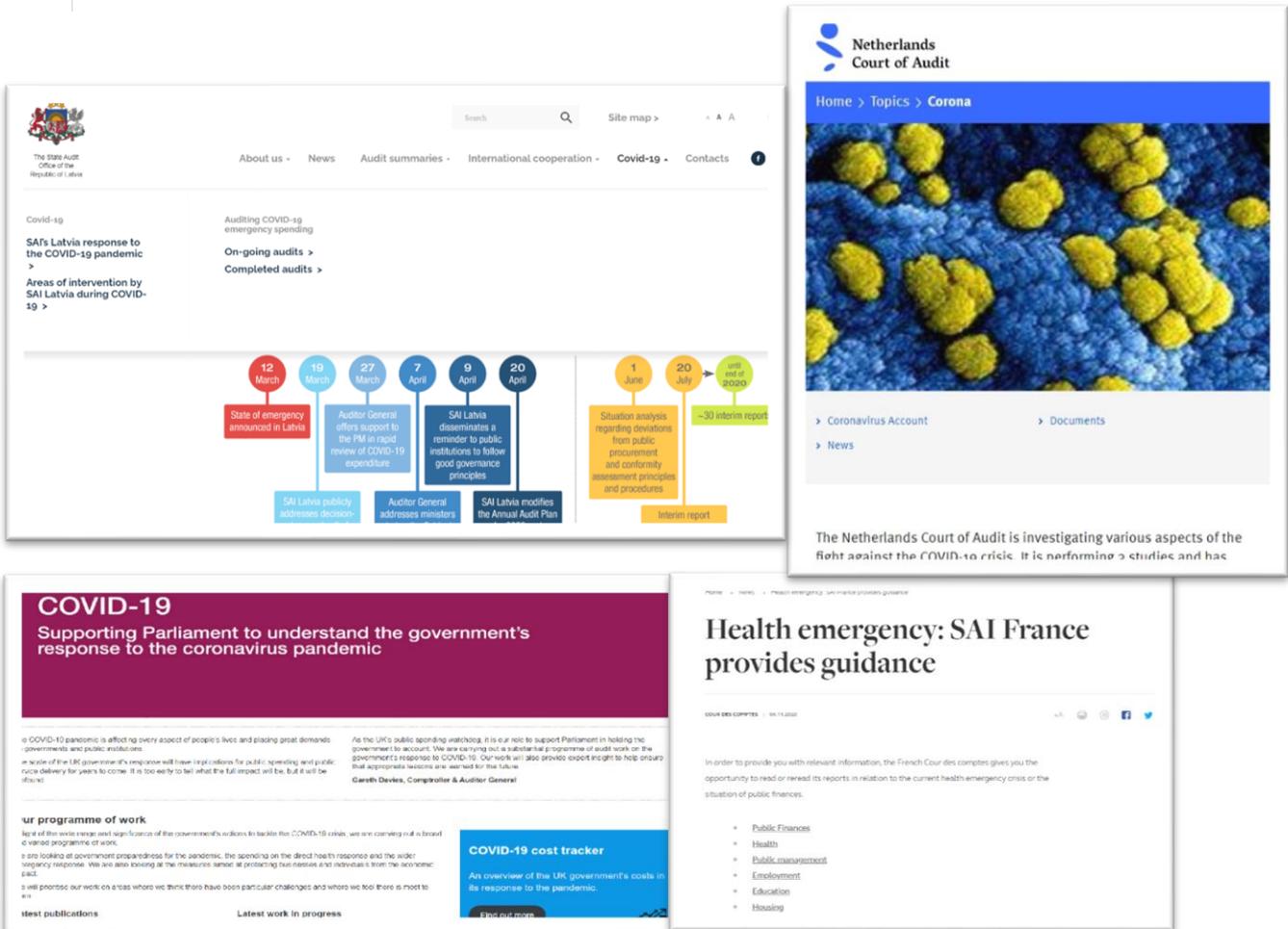
SAIs has regularly used mass media, official website, and social network platforms to inform public about the COVID-19 related challenges

Social media platforms are also used to inform the public on the SAI’s work arrangements, to inform the public on the SAI’s position on some of the governmental COVID-19 related measures, to provide highlights on its work, calling the auditees to act in line with the principles of accountability and transparency by implementing the audit recommendations.

Meanwhile, some SAIs developed and delivered a particular communication strategy to support COVID-19 audit programme.

48% of surveyed SAIs have created a special section on their website focusing on past audits, comprehending the current situation, and listing the reports that have been published in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. While some SAIs did not create special section on their website, they developed such section on the Intranet dedicated to the COVID-19 issues.

The SAI Latvia developed special section on its website to communicate COVID-19 related issues and audits already at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic.



The SAIs' provisions of information to the stakeholders and their involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic

Most of the SAIs already provide a responsive public audit service and continued cooperation with stakeholders including information exchange with parliament and government. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the approach for stakeholders' involvement and cooperation was also changed to remote working and some additional cooperation aspects were introduced.

For instance, a member of the French Cour des Comptes has been appointed to participate in a national independent mission on the assessment of the management of the COVID-19 crisis and on the anticipation of pandemic risks.

Experts from the National Audit Office of Finland were invited to hearings held by Parliamentary Committees also in 2020, but the number of invitations and involvements increased significantly. In addition, blogs and analyses published on their web pages provided information to meet the needs of various stakeholder groups.

Most of SAIs included COVID-19 related elements in their regular publications. In case of COVID-19 related audits, numerous special reports were published.

During the pandemic period, the Court of Accounts of the Republic of Moldova made extensive use of all available communication tools (official website, social media, and electronic media) and collaboration with the press to publicize the results of activities and present to the public the audit work carried out. The SAI has intensified cooperation with stakeholders to promote accountability in the public sector, ensuring the participation of the SAI representatives in 11 online events organized by NGOs (round tables, presentations of studies and analyses, thematic discussions).

While drawing up the annual activity plan of the National Audit Office of Lithuania, more intensive involvement of stakeholders, such as the Parliament, was ensured by the SAI to raise everyone's involvement in fighting the pandemic and to assess whether the measures chosen were appropriate.

Under the conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholders and the experts involved in the audit process were not attracted more often than usual in general. However, specific external expertise was needed in some COVID-19 related audits.

Under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions, the SAIs changed the organisation of their work, the existing approaches, solutions, and the format of auditing. Meanwhile, majority of surveyed SAIs continued to work in the same manner just in a remote or partially remote working mode.

Basically, audit procedures have remained the same, but daily work routine, team management solutions, and communication have moved to remote working methods. This included also digital (remote) communication with auditees, mass media, parliament, and other stakeholders.

Several SAIs were requested by their parliaments to conduct specific COVID-19 related audits, also in the countries where SAIs were fully independent in defining audit topics; therefore, this led to a change in the audit program.

The conditions of the global pandemic affected the way the Court of Accounts of Moldova carried out its planned audit activities, given the restrictions on travel to the authorities' headquarters and meetings with persons responsible for certain areas and operational processes, as well as the preparation of reports/financial statements. In these circumstances, it was necessary to rethink the audit activities and procedures for the accumulation of sufficient and adequate audit evidence, and it was decided to alternate the communication procedures, which required a rapid integration and professional accommodation. In such circumstances, to balance the need to maintain the quality of audits constantly, the Court of Accounts was pragmatic and ruled on:

- *Establishing a special activity regime of the institution.*
- *The extension of the reporting term of the mandatory financial audit missions.*
- *Initiating discussions with the management of the auditees to ensure that sufficient and timely information is obtained, both in electronic and scanned format.*
- *Implementation of high-performance information technologies, such as VPN (Virtual Private Network), which allows auditors to operate efficiently in a remote work mode.*



Under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions, the SAIs changed the organisation of their work.

- *Equipping audit teams with mobile computing technology and ensuring remote access to all necessary files and working documents; etc.*

3. Specific management decisions made to support SAI's reaction to the COVID-19 impact

Under COVID-19 pandemic influence, the SAIs introduced specific management tools.

Most of SAIs have established management committees, internal expert groups, emergency response teams or task forces in charge of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic within the SAI.

The National Audit Office of Lithuania has set up a working group composed of auditors, which is carrying out ongoing monitoring of the COVID-19 situation, examines measures to combat the pandemic, periodically provides information to the management and Parliament as needed and based on the relevance of the issues; it also provides information to other audit departments on whether a specific small-scope audit or evaluation in any area should be conducted. In each audit, the National Audit Office of Lithuania decided to assess the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on a specific field. In communicating the activity plans for 2021, the National Audit Office of Lithuania has referred very specifically to the topics dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic directly or indirectly.

The UK NAO set up a Safe Working Group under the existing Incident Risk Management Team to keep the NAO operational and support staff working remotely. The group coordinated with each audit practice (e.g., Value for Money and Financial Audit) who also set up COVID-19 management groups to identify and work through any impact on audit delivery. The safe working group was informed by the results of a weekly 'pulse survey' of staff asking if they were safe, well, able to work and what the UK NAO could do to support them. Further details can be found in the Executive Director Responsible's speech to the INTOSAI SCIE expert group.



Under COVID-19 pandemic influence, the SAIs introduced specific management tools.

In 2020, because of the pandemic circumstances, the use of conference platforms in the Bulgarian National Audit Office was required to conduct Management Board meetings, organize communication of the existing working groups, audit teams. A new system for reporting the work of employees and structural units has been introduced.

The European Court of Auditors set-up a specific knowledge node on COVID-19, application of business continuity plan and ensuring regular meetings of the Crisis Management Committee.

Such internal committees, task forces, and expert groups introduced within SAIs provided their recommendations depending on their respective situation and based on risk assessment.

In any case, SAIs continued to assess risks that may affect the performance of their audit work.

Due to COVID-19 pandemic impact, most of the EUROSAI member SAIs have made changes in the management style of their institution.

The most important measures taken since the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic relate to the generalization of digitalization, including remote working tools, and other forms of communication with external stakeholders, including parliaments and auditees.

The management of the SAIs intensified the efforts of remote management of employees, through extensive information, remote management methods, and the use of IT tools. At the same time, continuous monitoring of the activities of the audit teams in relation to the established objectives, terms, and tasks was ensured. Monitoring and supervision of audit activities have been taking place also throughout informal groups (*Zoom, MS Teams, WhatsApp, Viber, Blackboard* etc.).

The SAIs have acted to identify the most vulnerable groups and areas of the society (as part of an extraordinary risk analysis or a specially organised process, for example, COVID-19 situation risk assessment process).

Risk assessment and identification of the most vulnerable groups and areas during the monitoring processes was as part of the horizontal audit planning.

Following a risk assessment, SAIs updated annual audit plans and programmes to audit financial, compliance and performance aspects of



The management of the SAIs has intensified the efforts of remote management of employees.

measures for supporting businesses and vulnerable groups and areas affected by the crisis.

UK NAO: a key audit theme explored during our initial risk assessment and when planning individual audits is the impact of the government's response on vulnerable groups. This theme is a key part of UK NAO COVID-19 audit response and informs many of our outputs. For example, we have produced audits on protecting and supporting the clinically extremely vulnerable during lockdown, housing of rough sleepers, school meal provision for children from socio-economically challenged groups, the funding impacts on charities, adult social care.

In slightly different forms and with slightly different timetables, the French Cour des Comptes has carried out an in-depth reflection on the consequences of the health and economic crisis on their audit plan. Priority was given to identifying short-term effects, making flexibility for SAI to achieve quick results. They identified sectors and topics to audit or added a COVID-19 related aspect to already planned audit work.

During 2020, the SAO of North Macedonia adopted a new Risk Management Strategy and coordinators have been appointed for the implementation of this Strategy.

The European Court of Auditors introduced changes to risk management framework; new practice of 'reflection papers' to stimulate discussion on how to improve flexibility and ensure business continuity, created COVID-19 technical cell.

Measures aimed to identify the most vulnerable groups and areas of society (as part of an emergency risk analysis or a specially organized process, such as the COVID-19 risk assessment process) are also foreseen for SAIs work plans in 2021 including review of ongoing audits.

In the context of the good practices shared during the Zoom meetings by the EUROSAI working group and the actions taken by other SAIs against the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Court of Accounts of Moldova conducted the preliminary study on Moldova's response to the pandemic and the



The SAIs have defined priorities and areas for the COVID-19 related audits.

assessment of possible risks related to the economics, health, and social field. To prepare the study, the decisions of the National Extraordinary Public Health Commission and the Commission for Exceptional Situations were analysed, establishing the main measures to support the health sector and mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and population, with possible risk assessment.

COVID-19 related reports/audits are foreseen also in SAIs' audit plans for 2021.

As at April 2021, the UK NAO has published 14 audit reports, two overviews, two guides and a cost-tracker. We have announced a further three reports in 2021, with many others under consideration. Further details of our audit response can be found on our website and in the workstream B2 BIEP area.

For the French Cour des Comptes 2020-2021 program, some work has not been maintained or has been postponed in the audit planning for various reasons:

- *Abandonment or postponement of work related to the unavailability of auditees.*
- *Abandonment or postponement of work which no longer seems relevant or the treatment of which deserves a step back during the crisis.*
- *Increase of SAI flexibility so the audit staff could prepare reports linked to the pandemic impact.*

Conversely, additional work has been included in the audit planning:

- *Work on the measures of the emergency plan (solidarity fund and partial unemployment, in particular).*
- *In-depth work on public finances and their evolution.*
- *The budgetary work (NEB) should serve as a basis for a transversal treatment of the consequences of the crisis on the various ministerial areas.*
- *Subjects will be taken up or completed by including COVID-19 related aspects.*
- *New health topics considered.*
- *Specific work on the reactions to the crisis in the different areas of intervention of the SAI.*

At the institutional level, communication has been changed with the auditee by introducing remote cooperation methods. Meetings with the auditees via online tools have replaced audit visits so there has been no material impact.

In some EUROSAI member states, new regulations have allowed the auditees some extra time answering to the SAIs information requests. During the apex of the crisis, all the audit work was carried out with the primary concern of the audited administrations and bodies in order not to create burdens or constraints that would interfere with their missions.

For example, almost all audit interviews have been done remotely, meanwhile several SAIs have utilized remote cooperation methods with auditees to certain extent also before COVID-19 pandemic, so this was not a major change for them.

During the pandemic initiatives were brought also by the auditees to replace the transfer of paper documents by electronic transfer.

In the conditions of conducting remote audit activities, the use of advanced information technologies facilitated the cooperation with the auditees, making it possible to obtain a larger volume of information in electronic format.

34% of surveyed SAIs agreed with the government or the parliament on crucial COVID-19 related expenditures to be audited by the SAI or received proposals or requests for COVID-19 related expenditure audits. In member states where SAIs have mandate to select their audit topics completely independently, discussions with a parliament or government on SAIs' planned COVID-19 related audits were held more actively based on the SAIs' initiative.

For the UK NAO, our existing legislation provides the mandate to audit all central government expenditure. Given the £210bn (and rising) currently budgeted for COVID-19 response and the high level of parliamentary and public interest, it was important that we develop a robust audit response. The use of public funds for COVID-19 purposes will be assessed through c400 annual financial audits of UK government entities, supplemented by NAO COVID-19 audit programme of VFM/ Investigations work on specific areas of audit interest as described previously.



At the institutional level, communication has been changed with auditees by introducing remote cooperation methods.



The SAIs have agreed with the government or parliament on crucial COVID-19 related expenditures to be audited.

The State Audit Office of Latvia intensified its cooperation with the stakeholders proactively:

- *By communicating a public announcement one week following the announcement of the state of emergency in the country – SAO’s Latvia assessment of the situation ^[1],*
- *By addressing the Prime Minister, the responsible Ministers, and the Riga City Council and offering cooperation in getting ‘fast’ and evidence-based assurance over ‘emergency expenditure’,*
- *By addressing the Cabinet of Ministers with the same proposal and requesting to indicate high-risk areas/transactions within 2 weeks.*

Following the consultations with the stakeholders, the SAI Latvia modified its Annual Audit Plan timely to incorporate ‘fast’ assurance engagements, while keeping its full independence in terms of selecting the scope, timing, and auditees.

4. HR planning and management during the COVID-19 pandemic

Most of SAIs channelled certain amount of their resources for the COVID-19 related activities. Based on current situation, overall audit programmes were updated also by including COVID-19 related audits.

Auditing of the public spending for COVID-19 related measures became a priority for several SAIs while some SAIs have adjusted their ongoing audits by including COVID-19 related questions in their audit programmes.

The National Audit Office of Lithuania have chosen COVID-19 as priority, focusing a lot of resources on this, but did not try to quantify them, because the situation might change significantly according to the need for competences in audit. For issues relating to the COVID-19, the National Audit Office of Lithuania channelled over 50 % of its audit resources. Out of the 44 audits and assessments scheduled for 2021, performing as many as 22 of them, they are planning to assess the actions of public sector institutions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic impact at different extent.

Having changed its Annual Audit Plan 2020 on April 20 and having redirected a significant number of resources to COVID-19 expenditure assessments, the State Audit Office of Latvia has been conducting these assessments as compliance verifications within the framework of their annual financial audits. Several specific COVID-19 related audits have been also launched already in 2020 as separate compliance or performance audits.

The Romanian Court of Accounts following Parliament's request for an audit on the management of public resources during the state of emergency, audited 949 entities, and 700 external public auditors were engaged to carry out this mission.

One of the identified problem when conducting COVID-19 related audits is the high quantity of the support measures and dynamic changes of the legal requirements for the allocation of those funds. In some countries, the economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic was foreseen also in the state budget allocations for the SAI.



Most of SAIs have channelled certain amount of their resources for the COVID-19 related audits.



COVID-19 pandemic conditions affected the SAIs' annual budget adversely.

In coordination with the Ministry of Finance, the Court of Accounts of Moldova decided to reduce its budget for the current year by 2 million lei, which were redirected to finance strategic priority actions: combating COVID-19 pandemic, supporting the healthcare system, social and economic aid.

Considering the situation related to the increase in the prevalence of COVID-19 infection and its negative impact on the general situation in Latvia, the Council of the State Audit Office of Latvia proposed the Latvian Parliament not to apply regulation of the Law on Remuneration of Officials and Employees of State and Municipal Institutions regarding the annual indexation of the monthly salary for the Auditor General and the Council Members in 2021.

The State Audit Office of Hungary has fully supported the auditees with the function of consulting (e.g., letters to the directors of hospitals, monitoring audits, etc.)

In most SAIs, COVID-19 pandemic has not had any negative impact on work efficiency in terms of increased absenteeism due to sickness. On the contrary, some SAIs have even observed a positive “side-effect” of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions – sick leaves have dropped significantly in 2020. The reasons are probably a mix of several socialization factors: staff have not worked physically together in the offices; their children have not attended kindergartens, and the general level of hygiene has also increased. Additionally, some SAIs have indicated that staff working from home perhaps tend to keep on working despite having a cold or other minor sickness that would normally have prevented them from going to work to avoid infecting their colleagues. The closure of schools and nurseries was also identified in some cases as possible impact factor for the SAIs work efficiency as employees with young children were not always able to work all their contractual hours.

COVID-19 has affected our staff in different ways. In some cases, this has been due to illness, the challenges working remotely and lockdowns bring, but also for some colleagues coping with increased responsibilities at home. The UK NAO operates an activity-based costing system through our ERP, which tracks each hour staff work on specific projects. We established a

COVID-19 disruption project so staff could ‘charge’ any hours that they could not work because of COVID-19 related challenges. This included childcare when schools were closed to most pupils, plus other impacts on their working time such as limited opening times of supermarkets, doctors etc.

Implementation of remote working methods during the pandemic in general did not affect the work efficiency of the SAIs, as most of them adapted to the new conditions and were able to rely on an efficient remote work of their staff as well as proper functioning of IT support systems.

Some SAIs have identified that work productivity improved during this period, thus resulting in a higher number of published audit reports.

In recent years, the SAI of Czech Republic has been trying to reduce the burden of the auditees and has increased audit work at the office and reduced time spent onsite. This is practically meaning remote audit and therefore the SAI does not have major problems with planning audits under pandemic COVID-19 conditions. However, the pandemic has influenced communication and work among auditors. From the beginning of the different working conditions, employees lacked experience, e.g., with supervision or communication via different platforms. However, the SAO managed to overcome those obstacles.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and while already working remotely, the SAIs had sufficient skills to plan audits under the conditions of COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, additional efforts through communication were made to keep the staff motivated and engaged. Where possible, SAIs provided all technical support necessary that could make SAIs staff remote working conditions better (office chair, widescreen monitors, etc.).

The impact on our staff of working remotely under lockdown restrictions is something the UK NAO management team are fully aware of. We had already invested in mental health support initiatives, and these are being used to encourage staff to share how they are finding the COVID-19 situation. We invited expert external speakers to speak to staff, and, as noted before, are carefully monitoring the situation through line management conversations and a weekly office-wide pulse survey. The Head of the NAO has made it clear that the NAO is operating a ‘flexible working’ system – i.e., staff work when they can.



SAIs had sufficient skills to plan audits under COVID-19 pandemic conditions while working remotely.

During the remote working conditions, the National Audit Office of Finland provided special attention to various ways of supporting social contacts, informal meetings, and exchange of ideas virtually. These included virtual coffee breaks, intensified personal but remote contacts, and several online activities. A psychological support hotline has also been set up for the SAI staff.

The COVID Coordination Group was established at the National Audit Office of Lithuania (NAOL), which informs staff regularly on various COVID-19 related issues, prepares recommendations, instructions, memos, and other documentation, as well as advises the staff members on issues raised. On the NAOL's Intranet, there is a section where the staff members can register requests relating to COVID-19 issues. The NAOL also organises video online meetings of the institution's management and all staff once a week. Middle and senior managers are making additional efforts to support people as far as possible and to try to help them and maintain a work-rest balance, access to opt-out hours, etc.

Motivation and engagement are of course an issue, but so far not identified as the most affecting aspect regarding the SAIs' work efficiency. As per several SAIs, remote working could have imposed stress on some employees thus affecting efficiency of the SAIs work.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Austrian Court of Accounts has arranged psychological care/support if employees needed it.

The SAIs ensured equipment for home working available where possible, launched group breaks, encouraged use of video calling, some SAIs facilitated mindfulness and wellbeing sessions.

Apart from the accelerated digitalisation and for work environment reasons, the employees of Swedish National Audit Office were given time/encouragement to be physically active and to interact socially with colleagues. Other actions - ergonomic training, home-office equipment, etc. were also introduced.



Efforts have been made to keep SAIs' staff motivated and engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Remuneration for work under the conditions of remote activity in general was not affected but the workload increased due to the need to approve new COVID-19 pandemic related measures (organizational, procedural, technological, sanitary, HRM, etc.) and to produce COVID-19 related products (situation monitoring reports, COVID-19 related publications, etc.).

5. Support to the staff in adapting to working environment imposed by COVID-19

Staff training processes

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of SAIs ensured all planned trainings online. In addition, new topics were introduced such as IT, digital communication, remote working tools, as well as those courses helping to cope with new challenges were organized for the staff. Trainings focusing on remote work became an integral part of staff's training programme in several SAIs.

The French Cour des Comptes developed videoconference tools to allow exchanges between co-workers and with the auditees. The French Cour des Comptes also set up a digital Self-Help Forum for managing with the new ICT and remote-working tools.

The State Audit Office of Hungary has undertaken the role of social responsibility, so the SAI has hired some students and 'fresh' bachelors to help the work of the SAI, especially in the field of analytics.

The transition process to the new exceptional COVID-19 working circumstances had been at least to some extent easier to those SAIs who had already developed remote/ teleworking opportunities before the pandemic. Furthermore, the transition was eased by the fact that the staff already had strong skills in their work. Introduction/orientation of new employees also took place remotely, which was naturally challenging, but results have been reported as good, and the newcomers have been able to familiarize themselves with the work in their respective fields. A half of surveyed SAIs introduced additional or new technologies to improve work efficiency and reduce the adverse effects of the divided attention².

Online training courses allowed involving more staff members than in class-based seminars. It was indicated as good practice by the surveyed



All planned training was transferred to an e-environment. Additional courses helping to cope with new challenges were introduced.

² Additional burdens in remote working conditions where other (personal) duties must be performed in addition to the direct professional duties. For example, in families with children, one should provide support in the learning process or pay attention to older people living in the same household, and any other attention-seeking measures that fall outside the main place of work in the institution (office).

SAIs that the training session materials were made as open access sources on the institutions' intranet platforms.

The SAIs IT systems and remote working tools and procedures seemed to be sufficient to ensure efficient work. At some SAIs, the VPN bandwidth was increased several times to allow its use by all employees and secure access to many non-VPN tools and servers was developed (ministerial platforms, external document databases, *SharePoint*, personal drive, file transfer protocols (FTP), etc.).

The usage of online tools (video conferencing in particular) increased beyond the usual level. For the video conferencing, different platforms are continuously used, such as *Zoom*, *WebEx*, *MS Teams*, *Blackboard*, etc.

The French Cour des Comptes has developed a manual for remote working and made it available to the staff using web-conferencing systems.

More than a half of surveyed SAIs offered stress management course to the staff members without limitations to their position or seniority.

Lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused a physiological impact on both auditors and auditees. The Turkish Court of Accounts did not completely cut-off physical meetings to alleviate the negative psychological mood caused by isolation.

The National Audit Office of Finland cooperates with occupational healthcare actively, which has provided support during exceptional circumstances. In co-operation with occupational healthcare, expert lectures have been organized to support well-being of staff while performing their professional duties during the exceptional circumstances.



The COVID-19 pandemic caused a physiological impact on both auditors and auditees.

During this period, online “micro-courses” on good personal time management, new communication techniques and methods, including electronic, were provided throughout the institution in many EUROSAI member SAIs. At the same time, specific workshops on human resources management in the context of the remote work conditions were discussed in workshops for employees in management positions. In addition, SAIs tried to ensure that training video recordings and training materials (guides, manuals, regulations, etc.) were made available on SAIs online platforms when some of employees did not have the opportunity to be present in the online sessions.

Many SAIs indicated the provision of full access to remote working platforms throughout the whole day thus deviating from formal working day framework as a valuable approach. Such approach allowed the employees to manage their working hours according to their family needs and, consequently, to increase their productivity. Furthermore, the SAI provided an individual supply with the necessary equipment for the employees whose computer usage was limited by their children's educational needs.

Rather than introducing new systems or technologies, the National Audit Office of Finland have sought to review their day-to-day operations and make corrective actions to ensure that work efficiency was not compromised, and work pace was maintained.

The number of different IT software licenses was increased substantially so that everybody could communicate with any other colleague for videoconferencing and phone calls (on request also for external communications). The Microsoft Teams was activated for the whole Court of Audit of Belgium with the goal to give more videoconferencing possibilities and improve communication with the auditees (especially with the federal government, which were mostly on the same Microsoft Office 365 "tenant").

6. Competencies of auditors and auditees during the COVID-19 pandemic

The surveyed EUROSAI member SAIs have confirmed that their staff has sufficient skills and competencies to perform individual remote audit work, to ensure the teamwork of the audit groups and communication among the team members as well as with the auditees in most cases.

The remote communication and the feedback process on the audit reports with/from the auditees had an adverse effect on the SAIs work efficiency to some extent.

The Bulgarian National Audit Office experienced some difficulties since auditors and audit managers did not have electronic signatures yet.

Remote communication with the auditees did not affect the quality of the activities carried out. Despite the challenges, the EUROSAI members reported that the necessary efforts had been made to collect sufficient and adequate audit evidence and to produce qualitative audit reports.

In most cases, staff competencies and capabilities were assessed as per the established human resource development plans or strategies and were a part of the SAIs' standard HR management processes.



The SAI staff has sufficient skills and competencies to perform remote audit work in most cases.

7. Cooperation with stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic also affected the activity of the auditees like the one of SAIs, including the circumstances and special working regime in which the staff of the auditees worked. One of the factors with a direct impact on working conditions was the number of COVID-19 registered cases among the staff members of the auditees, which affected the cooperation between the SAI and the auditee in some cases, including process of presenting information, gaining audit evidence, motivation for immediate and close cooperation, and prompt communication of audit findings. Despite the situation described, the auditors could maintain an efficient and continuous communication with the representatives of the auditees in general.

Meanwhile, several SAIs have identified that some auditees do not have secure digital communication solutions.

Most auditees faced an exceptional workload during the pandemic. Therefore, data was more difficult to collect even more so as the public managers and the entities they maintained focused on curbing the crisis and alleviating its consequences. But attentive and professional communication between the SAIs and the auditees made it possible to ease the efforts to share information.

The implementation of solutions for secure videoconferencing and file transfer in the Swedish National Audit Office made communicating and getting access to documentation possible. In audits that normally would have required travel, communications were even improved when meetings could be held from home.

In some cases, only physical meetings or on-site audit work could manage very sensitive information.

The information systems of the auditees had enabled remote auditing for several SAIs already before the pandemic. Remote activity using these systems included requesting documents (registers, invoices, medical records, etc.) that were scanned and sent to the audit team by electronic means; the auditees facilitated access to some of their own databases, others were only accessible from the headquarters of the institutions continuously.

For many years, we have conducted analysis of the auditees' data by accessing the systems they use. The French Cour des Comptes



During the COVID-19 pandemic, the SAI's management has ensured active and direct communication with the government, the parliament, central government agencies, and stakeholders to enable the civic society to assess the relevance and effectiveness of governmental decisions.

has jurisdiction to access any system the auditees are using to carry out its audits.

In some EUROSAI member states, the auditees made initiatives to replace the transfer of paper documents by electronic transfer. In other cases, the information was transmitted electronically first and then physically sent to the SAI in addition.

Communication with the government, the parliament, central government agencies, and other stakeholders enabled the civic society to assess the relevance and effectiveness of governmental decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most of SAIs reported to have fulfilled their role in the parliamentary accountability process and communicated the results of audit findings to the public directly via multiple media channels.

The French Cour des Comptes: For many years, we have conducted analysis of open data as part of the French Open Government initiative. It is also part of our constitutional mission to inform the citizens with our reports and be part of the public debate.

The SAIs' management continued to meet with the top management of ministries, the representatives of the parliamentary committees, and other key stakeholders regularly during the pandemic as well.

The Court of Accounts of Moldova shall provide public information on its work and shall always maintain active communication with interested parties by:

- *Online transmission of the SAI's audit report meetings, available to all parties involved.*
- *Participation of the SAI in the online meetings of the Public Finance Control Committee, during which the SAI's reports are examined, with the participation of the auditees.*
- *Communication during online working meetings with auditees.*
- *Participation in online events organized by NGOs (round tables, thematic discussions).*
- *Organizing public consultations on the audit work program, SAI's strategic documents, in online workshops, with the participation of NGOs.*

8. Rearrangements in communication processes according to the COVID-19 pandemic situation

In general, SAIs did not change their audit practice and ensured that all audits are carried out in accordance with existing procedures and ISSAI standards.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the EUROSAI member SAIs did not have restrictions on providing audit reports and publications at the time and in the form chosen by the SAIs. However, some audits were cancelled or postponed in 2020 if there was:

- Limited availability of auditees.
- No more relevance regarding the evolution of the context.
- Need for more hindsight.
- Not enough resources.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the SAIs demonstrated their ability to respond rapidly to the situation by making recommendations to the government and the Parliament and/or calling for action and/or reminding about good governance principles.

The National Audit Office of Lithuania prepared an overview “Management of COVID-19 Crisis and Emergency” which summarised information on the actions and measures taken by the Government in February - October 2020 for the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and for reducing the negative consequences of the pandemic. <https://bit.ly/2MBhyVy>

In the National Audit Office of Finland, the pandemic was considered when analysing risks and planning future audits. The Finnish NAO published several blogs analysing and predicting the impact of the pandemic, which were widely read. A couple of audits were also initiated in summer 2020. However, the audit programme and publication of results as well as communication activities maintained to a high degree as normal.

The Court of Audit of Belgium performed a horizontal audit on economic measures in relation to COVID-19 pandemic. In the meantime, audit reports were issued also on the budget forecasts and appropriations.



SAIs demonstrated their ability to respond rapidly to the situation by making recommendations to the government and/or Parliament.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, SAIs demonstrated ability to respond rapidly to the situation by making recommendations to the government and Parliament and/or calling for action and/or reminding about good governance principles

The president of the Dutch Court of Audit published a joint statement with other High Councils of State (organizations with a similar independent position, like the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the National Ombudsman) to draw attention to the continuation of the democratic process.

However, there are EUROSAI member SAIs which mandate is rather definite and may not include much flexibility, therefore SAIs may have acted continuously according to their traditional practice and fully subject to the legal requirements and mandate set by law also in extraordinary circumstances.

The mandate of the SAI France does not include real time audits. It does not play a real time advisory role in the decision-making process of public managers. Audits are conducted ex-post and recommendations based on audit reports. The SAI conducted and published annual mandatory reports on the financial statements of the State, local and social security 2019 budgets including some segment related to the COVID-19 management and effects on finances in 2020.

In some EUROSAI member states, the Parliament has requested an audit on the management of public resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on their mandate, the SAIs considered such audit requests. The amendments of SAIs' audit plans and programmes are also considered as a rapid response to the situation.

Most of SAIs had the ability to obtain information/audit evidence for performing their audit work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions did not impact SAIs' audit work largely, except that it was not deemed desirable to commence audits in certain areas which would have interfered with or affected the delivery of essential services relating to the pandemic (or where face to face contacts would have been required and essential) in some situations.

The representatives of the National Audit Office of Lithuania are seeking to assess the priorities of the auditees and to ensure that the audit procedures do not impose an additional burden on those public sector bodies that address the challenges posed by the coronavirus today.

The State Audit Office of Latvia and the SAI Israel have published special interim reports regarding essential issues concerning the COVID-19 pandemic - economic, health, and education aspects.

9. SAIs' response to the need of communication enhancement and/or communication approach change during the COVID-19 pandemic

Most of the SAIs responded to the need to enhance communication and/or change the approach to communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the SAIs communicated their views and statements publicly promptly and regularly, with an exception that communication was provided virtually more rather than face-to-face.

The SAO of North Macedonia adopted Communication Strategy 2020-2023 including several activities to increase transparency and accountability:

- *New website was promoted (<https://dzt.mk>) to make the results of SAO work and conducted audits more accessible to stakeholders and the public. As part of the activities for improving communication, over 190 stakeholders were identified (journalists, mass media, websites, daily newspapers, weekly magazines, NGOs, broadcasting laboratories/ investigative journalists, and institutions) so they would receive regular e-mail notifications when each final audit report was published on the website.*
- *The form of the abstract of the final audit report was defined; the abstract contains main points of the audit report on one page to provide short and concise information about the report and to incite additional interest in its content. The abstract is distributed to all stakeholders and is published with each final audit report.*

All public meetings for the examination of the Court of Accounts of the Republic of Moldova audit reports are broadcasted online on the official SAI's website, in social media (www.youtube.com), and on the media sources www.privesc.eu. The SAI has intensified cooperation with stakeholders to promote accountability in the public sector, ensuring the participation of



The SAIs communicated their views and statements publicly promptly and regularly.

SAI's representatives in 11 online events organized by NGOs (round tables, presentations of studies and analyses, and thematic discussions).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the SAIs' managements did not change the external communication processes with stakeholders.

However, communication with stakeholders was organised mainly virtually by using different online tools and platforms including social media.

The Romanian Court of Accounts has a limited range of communication tactics as it is carrying out a project to update its communication strategy, a process that required adjustments during the pandemic and influenced external communication to some extent. However, the institution has launched its Facebook page in the beginning of 2021 as a quick alternative to react in the online environment.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most SAIs' managements have intensified their communication with the staff, but communication processes have not changed severely otherwise.

Frequent exchanges between management and staff were ensured through internal newsletters and intranet communication tools, and digital meetings with the whole organization were held more frequently.

Especially in the beginning of the pandemic, there was an increase in internal communication via intranet, emails, and online info sessions. Later, the National Audit Office of Finland also increased online activities aiming to ensure a sense of community and maintain employee well-being while remote working.

The electronic file system of the National Audit Office of Malta was restructured and adapted to remote work. A new videoconferencing system was introduced. All other criteria and tools for remote work (hardware and software, e.g., VP, etc.) were already in place and available for all staff members.

The internal communication process has been supplemented by organizing working meetings and management meetings through distance communication platforms.

Majority of SAIs has identified the most appropriate forms of communication and practices for the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

The French Cour des Comptes adopted a “DO NO HARM” approach initially by avoiding too often intervention in the public debate during the initial acute phase of the pandemic. Afterwards it adapted its communication.

The Romanian Court of Accounts is analysing the most appropriate forms of communication continuously given that the pandemic is not over. So far, the existing media platforms are the most effective for efficient, clear, and controlled communication.

The SAIs make extensive use of IT tools for organizing all kinds of formal and internal working meetings through communication platforms. Public meetings are also broadcasted online through social media, such as *YouTube* and *Facebook*, as well as on the official SAIs’ websites.

The French Cour des Comptes has communicated internally to adapt stance towards auditees but also widely to the public to explain the active role of the Court of Accounts during the pandemic.

The SAIs IT support was involved in the communication processes heavily within the SAIs. Involvement related to introduction of VPNs to all auditors, “cloud” services, teleconferencing, and IT support whenever required to address any communication difficulties encountered.

The SAIs have maintained and/or intensified communication with their target groups that are on their focus constantly: the parliament, the government, central public authorities, civic society, mass media, etc.



The SAIs have identified the most appropriate forms of communication and practices for the COVID-19 pandemic situation.
