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COVER NOTE

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To:	Ms Thérèse BLANCHET, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union
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Subject:	COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION Ex-post Evaluation for the Internal Security Fund - Borders and Visa (ISF-BV) for the 2014-2020 programming period

Delegations will find attached document SWD(2026) 76 final.

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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION

**Ex-post Evaluation for the Internal Security Fund - Borders and Visa (ISF-BV) for the
2014-2020 programming period**

{SWD(2026) 75 final}

BACKGROUND TO THE EVALUATION

The Regulation ⁽¹⁾ establishing the Internal Security Fund – Borders and Visa (henceforward “the ISF-BV” or “the Instrument”) for the 2014-2020 programming period, was adopted on 16 April 2014.

The Instrument was allocated an initial budget of EUR 2 760 million for all management modes. At the end of the programming period the total allocation had been EUR 2 900 million. The biggest share of funding (about 83% in the final total allocation) went to national programmes in shared management.

ISF-BV is implemented under shared, direct and indirect management. The programming occurs either at the Member State level through the national programmes or at the Commission level, via Annual Work Programmes (Union Actions, Specific Actions and Emergency Assistance).

During the 2014-2020 programming period, the Home Affairs Funds are governed by a separate legal act, i.e., the Horizontal Regulation², with the rationale to ensure a better coordination and management between them.

The ISF-BV has the general objective to contribute to ensuring a high level of security in the Union while facilitating legitimate travel, through a uniform and high level of control of the external borders and the effective processing of Schengen visas, in compliance with the Union’s commitment to fundamental rights and freedoms. Within this general objective, the Instrument pursued two specific objectives (SO):

1. Supporting a common visa policy to facilitate legitimate travel, provide a high quality of service to visa applicants, ensure equal treatment of third-country nationals and tackle illegal immigration.
2. Supporting integrated border management, including promoting further harmonisation of border management-related measures in accordance with common Union standards and through the sharing of information between Member States and between Member States and the Frontex Agency. It aims to ensure, on one hand, a uniform and high level of control and protection of the external borders, including by the tackling of illegal immigration and, on the other hand, the smooth crossing of the external borders in conformity with the Schengen acquis, while guaranteeing access to international protection for those needing it, in accordance with the obligations of Member States with regard to the respect for human rights, as enshrined in relevant national, EU and international laws, including the principle of non-refoulement.

¹ Regulation (EU) No 515/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 establishing, as part of the Internal Security Fund, the instrument for financial support for external borders and visa and repealing Decision No 574/2007/EC.

² Regulation (EU) No 514/2014 (OJ L 150, 20.5.2014, p. 112, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2014/514/oj>)

The purpose of this document is set out in Article 57(2)(b) of the Horizontal Regulation which requires the Commission to carry out an ex-post evaluation by 30 June 2025³ to assess the effects of the ISF-BV following the closure of the national programmes.

The temporal scope of this ex-post evaluation of the ISF-BV covers the period 1 January 2014 to 30 June 2024. Initially, funded activities were meant to end by 30 June 2023. However, following the Russian war of aggression towards Ukraine, an extension of the implementation of the funds by one year was agreed, so that Member States might make full use of still available funding to face the consequences of the war (⁴). Consequently, the deadline for the Commission to carry out an ex-post evaluation was also extended by one year, to 30 June 2025.

The geographical scope includes all ISF-BV participating countries, i.e. all Member States, except for Ireland and the United Kingdom, as well as the Schengen Associated Countries (Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein). The evaluation relied on qualitative and quantitative methods, including the consultation of Member States, Commission officials, implementing partners and beneficiaries.

MAIN FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Effectiveness

The ISF-BV proved effective in supporting Member States in progressing towards the two objectives in the areas of visa policy and external border management. National programmes were largely completed, with high absorption rates and delivery against targets. Despite major challenges - including the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and shifting national priorities in migration and border policy - ISF-BV activities remained on track. The one-year extension introduced by the Commission was acknowledged as instrumental in ensuring the continuation and finalisation of key actions.

The ISF-BV supported a range of activities designed to strengthen border surveillance, enhance risk analysis capabilities, and modernise information-sharing mechanisms. Funding was allocated to the development and maintenance of large-scale EU security systems, including the Schengen Information System and the Visa Information System. Investments were also made in border control equipment, ICT infrastructure, and personnel training to ensure harmonised and efficient border management across Member States. Additionally, the ISF-BV sought to improve cooperation between border authorities, foster intelligence-sharing, and enhance operational coordination with Frontex. These measures were expected to lead to more effective border controls, a more efficient and harmonised visa policy, and an overall reduction in security vulnerabilities at the EU's external borders.

³ The implementation period of the Home Affairs Funds 2014-2020 (including of the ISF-BV) was extended in 2022 by 1 year (from 30 June 2023 to 30 June 2024) to allow the Member States to fully use any unspent amounts from those programmes, and, where necessary, to swiftly revise the implementation of their programmes to address the challenges arising from the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022 (See Regulation (EU) 2022/585 amending Regulations (EU) No 514/2014).

⁴ The implementation period of the Home Affairs Funds 2014-2020 was extended in 2022 by 1 year (from 30 June 2023 to 30 June 2024) to allow the Member States to fully use any unspent amounts from those programmes, and, where necessary, to swiftly revise the implementation of their programmes to address the challenges arising from the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022 (See Regulation (EU) 2022/585).

The Instrument has contributed effectively to the harmonisation of the EU visa policy and to the more effective and uniform application of the Union acquis on visas. However, the depth of implementation varied between Member States. On the other side, the role of the Fund in expanding the geographical coverage of consular services remained limited.

As regards border management, the ISF-BV played an important role in strengthening the monitoring of borders across Member States, notably by supporting investments in infrastructure, biometric verification tools, and border guard training. These efforts resulted in tangible improvements to the effectiveness of border controls. In this regard, the support in the preparation of EES and ETIAS was essential.

Emergency Assistance under the ISF-BV played a targeted and timely role in addressing acute migration and border management crises between 2014 and 2020, especially during the peak of irregular migration flows in 2015-2017. Most actions were aimed at border surveillance and control, migratory pressure management, strengthening first reception services, operational support, search and rescue operations, infrastructure development and provision for legal information/interpretation for the effective management of immigration flows particularly in Greece, Italy and Bulgaria.

The quantitative regression analysis indicates that ISF-BV funding has had a significant impact on the effectiveness of integrated border management, even if the scale of such an impact was limited given the volume of funding. Specifically, a statistically significant correlation was observed between expenditure under Specific Objective 2 and an increase in the number of detections of fraudulent travel at border crossing points.

Efficiency

The analysis identified varying degrees of efficiency among Member States, with top-performing countries achieving substantial outcomes at lower costs, while mid-tier and low performers varied in efficiency. The analysis, conducted for Specific Objectives 1 and 2, revealed that efficiency is influenced not only by the type of intervention but also by the specific contexts and needs of each Member State.

In general, there was a positive perception of the cost-effectiveness of the funding amongst stakeholders. Moreover, mechanisms such as rigorous cost control, lean project management, and comprehensive risk assessments were implemented at the Member State level to enhance cost-effectiveness. Yet, systematic data collection needed for this calculation was lacking. Hence, a comprehensive analysis of efficiency was not possible.

The efficiency of the interventions was influenced by a series of factors. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted project timelines and indicator achievements, prompting adjustments in project management and monitoring practices; limited staff supply often caused project delays and increased the burden on existing staff; price surges due to inflation also affected cost-effectiveness; compliance with public procurement, which is itself an element of cost-effectiveness, sometimes posed challenges, leading to project delays in some Member States.

Simplification and reduction of administrative burden

The Instrument introduced significant provisions to simplify funding procedures and reduce administrative burden. However, their implementation and impact were uneven.

The introduction of the Multi-Annual Programming is widely considered the most successful simplification measure. It has significantly reduced administrative burden by allowing long-term planning and resource allocation, thus ensuring a stable and predictable funding framework.

Responsive and adaptive national eligibility rules ensured that funds remained flexible and aligned with national needs, fostering greater agility in project implementation. Despite these benefits, challenges remain, such as the need to balance flexibility with EU compliance, as well as misalignments between national and EU rules that still contribute to bureaucratic complexity.

Several Member States successfully applied simplified cost options during the 2014-2020 programming period. Their use has indeed proven to be an effective tool in reducing administrative burden for both Member States and beneficiaries. However, despite their widely recognised benefits, simplified cost options were not universally adopted.

Procurement remains a significant challenge due to lengthy procedures, substantial documentation requirements, and rules which continue to slow project implementation in some Member States. In addition, public procurement rules are supplemented by national regulations tailored to the specific context of each Member State, with a corresponding impact on administrative burden.

Operating support has proven effective in streamlining fund management by allowing authorities to focus on essential tasks, such as maintaining systems and ensuring operational stability without the complexity of project-based funding procedures. This support has reduced the administrative burden and simplified processes.

Coherence and complementarity

The ISF-BV was considered internally coherent, as different components serve to meet specific, differentiated needs. There are formal and informal mechanisms in place at the EU and national levels to ensure complementarities and, where relevant, synergies across the different components of the ISF-BV. Union Actions provided an added value as it financed transnational actions or actions of particular interest to the EU. Nonetheless, given that they were directly or indirectly managed by the Commission, it was harder to ensure synergies with national level funding during the implementation stage.

In terms of external coherence, coordination mechanisms between the ISF-BV and other EU funds exist at the programming stage, inside the Commission and through the Home Affairs Committee. However, this is less clear at the implementation stage.

While the study identified that different examples of mechanisms were in place to ensure complementarity with national initiatives, the evaluation could not confirm formal mechanisms existed across all Member States. In general, the stakeholders consulted considered that the ISF-BV is complementary to national-level policies and funding instruments. The stakeholder

consultations did not identify cases of duplication or overlap between the Instrument and national funding instruments.

The ISF-BV is coherent with the objectives and activities of the other Home Affairs Funds (AMIF and ISF-Police), as well as other EU funds. An area seen to be important was the coherence between ISF-BV and the Horizon 2020 programme, as no other funding mechanism existed to further build on the pipeline of border management related innovation developed under the Horizon 2020 programme. Yet, stakeholders were often unaware of the relevant R&D projects funded in their country. As a result, Member States did not generally prioritise follow up to Horizon 2020 under the ISF-BV as they tended to focus on addressing more immediate needs.

With regard to the ISF-BV funding in relation to third countries, no overlaps were identified with other EU funding in third countries. Coordination between the participating countries and DG HOME has become much closer and more institutionalised since the migration crisis of 2015 which made the topic a political priority.

As far as coherence with external spending programmes is concerned, notably the NDICI, enhanced cooperation and coordination on programming both between the Commission services and with EU Member States are needed. There are several challenges in the current funding architecture that should be addressed, including notably: the insufficient alignment of the Union's external migration and security funding with the Union policies in these areas; the persistent challenge to use all existing (policy, funding, investment and other) tools, both at the disposal of the EU and its Member States, in a Team Europe spirit, to use strategically and timely leverage in relation to partner countries in order to improve cooperation on migration and security; the limitations for funding migration- and security-related actions in third countries, given that most of spending in the external dimension must comply with the criteria for development assistance ⁽⁵⁾ eligibility.

Finally, the ISF-BV is coherent with Frontex activities due to the involvement of Frontex at planning stage. The implementation of national capability planning is expected to further increase the alignment of DG Home funding and Frontex activities.

EU added value

The ISF-BV's support increased the overall resources available for border control and migration management. Without the support of the Instrument, several Member States reported that they would have struggled to implement essential EU policies effectively. An interruption of the Instrument would pose challenges for most participating countries, risking setbacks in critical operations.

Sustainability

Many ISF-BV-supported infrastructure and IT investments are expected to remain in use well beyond the funding period, particularly where national budgets or strategic frameworks ensured their integration into core operations. However, reliance on EU funding of some Member States

⁵ Official development assistance eligibility criteria is set by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

remains a concern for high-maintenance assets, particularly in those Member States with budgetary constraints.

Relevance

The evaluation confirmed that the objectives and actions funded under ISF-BV were highly relevant to the identified needs of Member States. The design of national programmes was informed by an assessment of national strategic documents defining long-term goals and by stakeholder consultations, ensuring that priorities reflect their needs. Policy dialogue between the Commission and the Member States allowed for addressing challenges encountered during the previous funding period.

ISF-BV demonstrated significant flexibility, allowing Member States to adapt their national programmes in response to evolving needs and emerging challenges in border management. This adaptability was crucial to maintaining the relevance of the programme throughout its implementation period (2014-2020), particularly in light of unforeseen events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting migratory patterns.

Union Actions under ISF-BV were found to be relevant in addressing transnational needs that are of particular interest to the EU as a whole and funding through Emergency Assistance effectively addressed urgent needs arising from crises at the external borders, providing timely and tailored support to Member States facing disproportionate migratory pressures.