

Audit of the monitoring of the use of federal assistance payments to people with protection status S

State Secretariat for Migration

Key facts

In April 2022, the Federal Council launched "Programme S" to support Ukrainian residents fleeing their homes. It was set up by the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) one month after the activation of the temporary protection status S. As an end to the war is not in sight, the Federal Council has extended the duration of protection status S until March 2025. At the end of 2023, there were 65,746 holders of protection status S living in Switzerland. Programme S is aimed at providing Ukrainians with the means to participate in Switzerland's social and professional life. This ad hoc programme was inspired by the cantonal integration programmes. When it introduced the programme, the SEM encouraged the cantons to implement the Swiss integration agenda. This joint endeavour by the Confederation and the cantons entered into force in 2019 and defines the mandatory and measurable goals for integrating temporarily admitted persons and refugees. In November 2023, the Federal Council introduced a target for integrating those with protection status S into the workplace. By end-2024, 40% of S permit holders should be in work. This represents a doubling of the average employment rate for this group.

The financial support per person amounts to CHF 250 per month. As at December 2023, the financial volume of Programme S for the cantons was CHF 316 million. The total federal contribution was CHF 2.09 billion as at end-2023, of which CHF 1.77 billion went on accommodation, social assistance, health insurance and other basic requirements.

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) examined the SEM's monitoring of Programme S's implementation. For this purpose, it also audited the use of funds in three cantons (St Gallen, Solothurn and Vaud).

The audit findings were good. The use of federal funds is considered to be appropriate overall. The SEM implemented Programme S swiftly and proactively. However, given the extension of protection status S, adjustments will need to be made to the monitoring tools. The use of funds in cantons with decentralised organisations should be traceable, and hence more transparent. Monitoring should also cover the implementation risks of Programme S as regards differences between cantons.

An appropriate framework for Programme S, but a need for traceability of implementation

Programme S takes overall account of the specificities of those with protection status S. The SEM relies on relevant information gathered from this group, such as language proficiency, professional training and work experience. The support programme for S permit holders has increased the complexity of federal funding in the area of migration. The SFAO considers that there is a significant risk of cross-subsidisation between people with protection status S and people seeking asylum. Consequently, the SEM was obliged to increase the transparency around the use of Programme S funds. The SFAO recommends that the SEM request detailed statements from the cantons on the use of funds.

The cantons used their own integration programmes as a reference for implementing Programme S. They supplemented the catalogue of measures for those integration programmes to reflect the requirements of Programme S and/or increased the capacity. The introduction in 2024 of mandatory individual monitoring – an essential part of the Swiss integration agenda – will strengthen the synergies between holders of protection status S, on the one hand, and temporarily admitted persons and refugees, on the other. Nonetheless, close monitoring of the cantons remains necessary, and should even be stepped up where they have lost contact with part of the group with protection status S. In doing so, the SEM should also take account of exogenous factors that might affect the achievement of the Swiss integration agenda's objectives.

The SEM's monitoring of the cantons needs to be strengthened

The SEM's strategy for monitoring Programme S is not sufficiently integrated into that of the cantonal programmes, including the Swiss integration agenda. The risk assessment does not cover the dual aim (joint goals of return and integration), the limited duration of the programme and the strengthened goals as regards integration into the workplace. Yet the SEM has reliable and relevant information in this regard, and it should use this better. It should also pay closer attention to diversity and the risks associated with cantonal organisations in its monitoring approach. Against this background, the SFAO has issued two recommendations to reinforce the SEM's monitoring of Programme S. The first recommendation is to take the specificities of Programme S into account in its overall monitoring concept for integration matters. The second is to introduce a cantonal risk profile into its monitoring strategy.

Implemented in a structured and progressive manner, Programme S's steering organisation is light and flexible. It has a wide range of information and analytical tools at its disposal. However, the level of skills and the extent of monitoring for Programme S vary, according to the SEM's cantonal reporting agents. The latter are supported by the Programme S project team, which provides assessments. Individual discussions are held prior to the annual meetings with the cantons.

The SEM focuses on providing guidance to the cantons on implementing Programme S (preventive measures). The SFAO noted that the measures taken proactively since the start of the war were comprehensive and coherent. By contrast, measures for monitoring implementation by the cantons are limited. The SFAO found that the SEM did not carry out any on-site checks on the use of Programme S funds. It took note of the SEM's repeated requests for clarification in 2023 with regard to the 2022 statement from the canton of Ticino. This resulted in substantial corrections. The SFAO also observed that the SEM will shortly be carrying out an audit of the Programme S statements from the canton of Valais. In the SFAO's view, there is a significant risk of cross-subsidisation between the cantonal integration programmes (including the Swiss integration agenda) and Programme S in this canton. It recommends that the SEM take the necessary measures to address this risk.

Original text in French