

## COVID-19 vaccine procurement – Special audit

Performance audit

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### What we assessed and why

We reviewed COVID-19 vaccine procurement as part of a special audit at the request of the National Council.

Our audit objectives were:

- to analyse the financial framework conditions and the consequences of the voluntary waiver of the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines;
- to examine procurement contracts and Austria's role in COVID-19 vaccine negotiations at EU level;
- to assess the management and coordination of vaccine procurement, including delivery dates and quantities; and
- to assess the deployment of COVID-19 vaccines.

We covered the period 2020-2021 and commented on the latest developments in 2022.

### What we found

The COVID-19 vaccine procurement aimed at acquiring sufficient vaccines for the population of Austria and contribute to the management of the pandemic. In 2020, the 27 EU member states reached a decision on a joint procurement. The EU strategy was to give all member states access to jointly procured vaccine doses, each country in proportion to its population. For Austria, this meant an allocation of around 2 %. Countries could also order greater or smaller quantities than their respective allocations.

Orders were handled separately by each member state – in Austria through the Ministry of Health. This allowed the member states a certain margin of discretion, especially where quantities were concerned.



## We found that:

- Up to the spring of 2021, Austria had procured fewer COVID-19 doses than its allocation. It was not until June 2021 that enough vaccines were available, from a range of manufacturers. Starting in October 2021, the volume of orders was greater than the national population key.
- Within the Ministry of Health, there was no clear attribution of responsibility for COVID-19 vaccine procurement and logistics between, on the one hand, regular departments and teams and, on the other, the crisis unit set up to improve the efficiency of measures to tackle the pandemic, and the instructions given by the Minister of Health in this regard were contradictory.
- The Ministry department usually dealing with buying vaccines – e.g. measles vaccines – was not responsible for COVID-19 vaccine procurement. Instead, in 2020 procurement was mainly handled by the Ministry's special commissioner for health and an assistant, and from March 2021 it was taken on by the staff working on the COVID-19 vaccination sub-project – the exact number of whom changed frequently.
- At the start of procurement in June 2020, detailed calculations of spending forecasts were missing, as well as the assessment of needs, which had no proper documentary support. The Ministry of Health carried out undocumented internal calculations on the expected need for vaccines based on different variants and assumptions with no comprehensible basis – e.g. in the application of the National Vaccination Board's recommendations – with regard to the required number of vaccinations per person and the time interval between the administration of vaccine doses.
- The members of the National Vaccination Board came from a variety of medical and pharmaceutical disciplines, thus allowing to rely on already established relationships and contacts with vaccine manufacturing companies. However, the Ministry of Health did not ask for declarations of possible conflicts of interest until February 2021, and until the end of October 2022 access to these declarations was restricted.
- While the National Vaccination Board's rules of procedure provided for the minutes of meetings to be published on the Ministry website, publication was delayed at times.
- Owing to an oversupply of COVID-19 vaccines in Europe and the USA from the end of 2021 at the latest and a lack of international demand, it was difficult for Austria to donate vaccines, leading to concerns that the minimum durability of the vaccines would have reached the end of their shelf life and that the vaccines would then have to be disposed of.





## What we concluded

Given the constantly evolving context of COVID-19 vaccine procurement (including the emergence of new viral variants, and the announcement and phasing-in of compulsory vaccination), we understood the importance of securing enough doses for the Austrian population.

We recommended to:

- clarify where the responsibility lays for COVID-19 vaccine procurement and logistics;
- in terms of the assessment of vaccine needs:
  - base procurement on needs assessments documented as part of the procedure and relied on a coherent set of assumptions;
  - assess needs, wherever possible, relying on scientific projections or verified scientific recommendations for the use of vaccines;
- maximise objectivity: the members of the National Vaccination Board should be required to submit regular declarations of possible conflicts of interest, and these should be made public;
- publish the minutes of meetings of the National Vaccination Board without delay;
- take appropriate measures in time to avoid, as far as possible, COVID-19 vaccine doses reaching the end of their shelf life and requiring disposal.