



Operation and experiences of the second generation of the Schengen evaluation system

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Abstract

Aim: This study aims to explore and summarise nearly a decade of the operations of the second-generation Schengen evaluations, along with the direct experiences related to its implementation.

Methodology: Professional, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and content analysis.

Findings: The comprehensive Commission report published in 2020 was of strategic importance in analysing the first five-year programme of the Schengen evaluation system, examining the operational efficiency and coherence of the Schengen area. Significant hindering factors emerged during the implementation of the previous evaluation system, such as the slow administrative processes, the burden on member states, and the lack of expert preparedness. The original objectives of the evaluation mechanism, such as dynamism and speed, were not fully achieved, which was further hampered by the slow administrative processes of the Commission. The renewal of the Schengen mechanism became unavoidable from 2021.

Value: The study can contribute to the scientific understanding of the reasons and processes that justified the reform of the second-generation Schengen evaluations.

Keywords: Schengen, Schengen evaluations, Scheval, evaluation mechanism

The manuscript was submitted in English. Received: 26 November 2024. Revised: 30 November 2024
Accepted: 10 December 2024.

Introduction, contextualization

On 16 November 2010, the European Commission adopted a proposal for a comprehensive Schengen evaluation mechanism based on a regulation adopted by the Council. The proposal was part of the dual Schengen reform package (Bocquillon & Dobbels, 2014), which included the proposal mentioned above on the one hand and, on the other, a proposal to amend Regulation (EC) No 562/2006 (former Schengen Borders Code), which has since been repealed. After several years of legal procedure, the legal basis for the Schengen Evaluation and Monitoring Mechanism (Scheval) has been formally adopted through Council Regulation (EU) No 1053/2013 ('Scheval Regulation 1053/2013'). The regulation entered into force in November 2014, creating the second generation of Schengen evaluations and a complex mechanism of evaluations, which previously only operated on an intergovernmental basis. The regulation was in force until 2023, when the new EU Council regulation¹ launching the third generation of Schengen evaluations entered into force.

The purpose of this study is to explore and summarise the nearly 10 years of operation of the second generation of Schengen evaluations and the direct experience of its functioning. The research is mainly based on professional interviews, documents and content analysis.

Operation of the Schengen evaluation system between 2014-2019 (second generation)

The monitoring mechanism under the Scheval Regulation 1053/2013 served a dual purpose. On the one hand, it was intended to ensure a comprehensive evaluation and monitoring of the application of the Schengen acquis by the Schengen Member States. On the other hand, it also covered monitoring the fulfilment of the Schengen conditions in those Member States where no decision has been taken to apply the Schengen framework in full or partially. This function is commonly described as the 'putting-into-effect' (Pascouau, 2012). The Regulation stated that the Commission should conduct objective and impartial evaluations in cooperation with the Member States. Scheval Regulation 1053/2013 defined the Schengen application areas to be assessed as follows:

¹ , i.e. Council Regulation (EU) 2022/922 of 9 June 2022 on the establishment and operation of an evaluation and monitoring mechanism to verify the application of the Schengen acquis, and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1053/2013.

- Management of external borders:
- Visa policy;
- Schengen Information System;
- Data Protection;
- Police cooperation;
- Judicial cooperation in criminal matters (former Regulation of the Council on the schengen evaluation mechanism, 2013)

The evaluation areas cover various dimensions. External border management has strategic relevance in maintaining the security and stability of countries, particularly regarding migration, irregular migration, terrorism and other cross-border challenges. The Schengen visa policy regulates how citizens from third countries can obtain visas to enter the Schengen area. The Schengen Information System (SIS) is a large-scale IT system between the Member States of the area, designed to support border control, the rapid exchange of information and cooperation on internal affairs between the countries of the Schengen area. EU data protection refers to the data protection framework established by the European Union to ensure compliance in handling personal data within the EU. The most significant legislation in this area is the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which entered into force on 25 May 2018 (GDPR, 2016). Police cooperation refers to the mechanisms for police cooperation between EU Member States. In this context, it is important to highlight that in several fields, cross-border cooperation serves as a tool for cohesion and regional policy within the European Union (Soós & Fejes, 2008). Judicial cooperation in criminal matters is based on the fundamental principle of mutual recognition of judgements and judicial decisions. The European Union's cooperation with third countries in criminal matters is of paramount importance. These organisations are actively involved in the fight against serious crime.

The Scheval Regulation 1053/2013 required the European Commission to set up a multi-annual evaluation programme covering five years, in which each Member State must be evaluated. In the framework of the multi-annual evaluation programme, the Commission had to determine in advance - and, if necessary, adapt in the meantime - the list of Member States to be evaluated, broken down in advance (in years), as well as the year of the pre-accession evaluation of the countries to be evaluated which are about to become members (Schengen accession). The multi-annual evaluation programme set a broad framework for the next five years. However, the timing of the evaluations to be carried out each year and the details of the arrangements for carrying them out had to be laid down by the Commission in the annual evaluation programme under the

Regulation. However, in the strictest confidence, the Commission also had to draw up a part of the programme, which was not made public to the Member States, covering the so-called unannounced on-site visits.

Under the Scheval Regulation 1053/2013 obligations, Frontex had to present a detailed risk analysis annually to the Commission and the Member States. The risk analysis had to cover several factors, including illegal immigration and incidents at the external borders in the operational environment. Recommendations include which priorities to focus on for next year's assessments (Borsa, 2020). In addition, Frontex was required to submit an additional specific risk analysis to the Commission annually. This document contained specific recommendations relating to the priorities for the assessments to be carried out during the unannounced on-site visits. It focused on the activities that were planned to be carried out in the following year.

The Regulation mandated the European Commission, in cooperation with the Member States, to develop a standard questionnaire to be completed and sent to the Commission by the Member States for each evaluation area before the on-site evaluations. The questionnaire had to be designed to take into account the organisational and technical tools necessary for the implementation of the Schengen acquis, as well as the available statistical data, related legislation and recommendations in the Schengen Catalogue for the different areas of evaluation (Wagner et al., 2020). The European Commission sent the questionnaires in the first half of each year to the Member States for evaluation the following year. Member States had to return the completed standard questionnaires to the Commission within eight weeks of receipt of the questionnaire. The Commission was obliged to make the replies available to the other Member States and to inform the European Parliament of these data.

The Regulation provided for the setting up an on-site visit team composed of experts appointed by the Member States and representatives of the Commission. The Commission could request Member States to nominate experts to participate in these on-site visits. The Commission invited Member States to nominate experts at least a quarter of a year in advance for pre-announced on-site visits and at least two weeks before the planned start of unannounced on-site visits.

The maximum number of Commission representatives during the on-site visits was two. The maximum number of Member States' experts was eight for planned on-site visits and six for unannounced on-site visits, thus limiting the number of participants. An important criterion was that Member State experts could not participate in an evaluation mission where a site visit was planned in the Member State where they were working or performing their duties. The Commission could also invite Europol, Frontex or other EU offices, bodies or

agencies to delegate a representative to the evaluations to observe a site visit regarding its competence (Monar, 2014). The leading expert role in the field teams was to be played by a Commission representative and a Member State expert. The field team members jointly appointed this lead position within the shortest possible time after the team was set up. The quality, efficiency, and objectivity were fundamentally ensured by the readiness of the experts conducting the evaluations. These experts needed suitable qualifications, a deep theoretical understanding of the relevant fields, practical experience, extensive knowledge of evaluation principles, methods, and techniques, and strong language skills (Balla et al, 2019).

The Regulation sets out a general framework for inspections on the actual sites in the Member States. The European Commission, in close cooperation with the lead experts and the Member State concerned, was required to draw up a detailed programme for the announced on-the-spot visits, following the guidelines of the annual evaluation programme already mentioned. The draft programme indicated that specific sites, organisations, and establishments are subject to personal checks while reserving the right to inspect sites that had not previously been agreed (Éberhardt, 2018). The Commission had to share the programme with the Member States concerned.

Scheval Regulation 1053/2013 required an evaluation report to be prepared following each evaluation. This report had to be drafted by the field team, considering the findings of the on-site visit and the analysis of the pre-completed standard questionnaire. The Regulation explicitly stated that Member State experts and Commission representatives were responsible for preparing the evaluation report and ensuring its consistency and quality. During the on-site visits, the evaluators were able to rate each finding in one of three categories:

- Compliant;
- Compliant, but improvement is necessary;
- Not complying with Schengen requirements (non-compliant) (former Regulation of the Council on the schengen evaluation mechanism, 2013).

Based on the main findings of the evaluation report, specific recommendations for the Member State concerned were drawn up and adopted by the Council of the Union rather than the Commission, then transmitted to the European Parliament and national parliaments. The recommendations were based on the findings and assessments of the evaluation report, which was drawn up by Member States' experts and Commission representatives, who recommended that the Member States concerned take the necessary measures to remedy the shortcomings identified.

The Regulation has also established a harmonized and continuous monitoring framework by requiring Member States to draw up action plans for each of the sets mentioned above of recommendations per evaluation area, setting out targets for national measures ‘to remedy any deficiencies identified in the evaluation report’ (former Regulation of the Council on the Schengen evaluation mechanism, 2013) , indicating the action envisaged and the deadlines for implementation. The action plans had to be submitted to the European Commission and the Council within three months of adopting the recommendations. However, this deadline was extended to one month if the evaluators found serious shortcomings during the audit. Moreover, in case of identification of a serious deficiency, the Commission was authorized by the Regulation to carry out (unannounced) on-the-spot visits to verify the implementation of the action plan (Guild et al., 2016).

In order to ensure proper follow-up, the Regulation also required the Member States evaluated to report at appropriate intervals (in the form of a follow-up report) on the status of implementation of the planned measures. This obligation persists until all the measures in the action plan have been completed and the Commission has declared them ready for closure, i.e. has accepted their implementation.

Operational experiences of the Schengen evaluation system between 2014-2023 (second generation)

The mechanism assessment commenced in the latter half of 2019 (Ulrich et al., 2020). The Commission published on 25 November 2020 and presented its report on the evaluations covered by the first multi-annual evaluation programme (2015-2019) in the Council Working Party for Schengen matters on 15 December 2020, in line with the Scheval regulation 1053/2013. The Commission’s report on the functioning of Scheval, as its title suggests, focused on the evaluations carried out under the multi-annual evaluation programme covering the period 2015-2019.

The sluggish evaluation process is a pivotal challenge to Scheval’s effectiveness. While the number of evaluation visits exceeded 200 and the European Commission adopted almost 200 evaluation reports and more than 4500 recommendations, only 45 evaluations were fully completed, with a large number of evaluation reports and recommendations for evaluations carried out in 2019 still to be adopted before the report is published, i.e. by the end of November 2020 (URL1). According to the reports and the Commission’s assessment,

on average, 11 months elapsed between the end of an evaluation visit and the adoption of the Council's recommendations by the Member State evaluated to remedy the shortcomings, but '25% of cases, this phase took over a year, and in twelve cases, more than 18 months'. However, the fact that the assessments and recommendations focused too much on specific and detailed circumstances rather than on the fundamental dimensions and expectations of the Schengen acquis was also an indication of a problem with the system (URL1). Many other problems are associated with this, such as the important observation that migration is a fast-evolving area with constantly changing trends and composition of flows. In the case of migration management, it may be particularly true that overly prolonged controls do not provide an adequate solution to a measure proposed at a given time but implemented after a long period, as circumstances may constantly change. In addition to the above, the report identifies the following major weaknesses:

- The inclusion of respect for fundamental rights in the evaluation was not sufficiently implemented in the evaluations;
- Slow implementation of commitments in Member States' action plans and excessive administrative burdens on Member States;
- The lack of experts in some areas, such as data protection and visa policy, and the imbalance in Member States' offers (one third of the experts were nominated by the same Member States);
- The system did not ensure adequate management of the Schengen situation, and the involvement of the European Parliament was not systematic. (URL1)

The recurrent shortcomings and diverging practices between Member States identified in the Commission's report may, in my view, stem from, among other things, the non-uniform implementation of the Schengen rules and the geopolitical situation of Member States (e.g. some States have a land external border section, others do not), which may have an impact on the overall functioning of the Schengen area as a whole (Zsákai, 2022).

A notable point in the report is that the prolonged duration of evaluations posed a significant challenge to the effectiveness of Scheval. While over 200 evaluation visits took place between 2015-2019 and the European Commission adopted nearly 200 evaluation reports and more than 4,500 recommendations, only 45 evaluations were fully completed², and many reports and recommendations from evaluations conducted in 2019 remain unadopted. The findings reveal that

2 A full Schengen evaluation can be considered completed only in case the monitoring phase (full completion of correction measures and therefore closure of the national action plan) is done as well.

the evaluations and proposals (to correct deficiencies) have focused excessively on specific details instead of addressing the core objectives and expectations of the Schengen acquis. This issue is compounded by other challenges, notably the fact that e.g. migration (notably irregular migration) is a rapidly changing phenomena with constantly evolving trends and patterns. Extended review periods may fall short in migration management because conditions can shift significantly before proposed measures are actually implemented. Additionally, on-site visits have been a recurring concern, as unannounced inspections did not yield the expected effectiveness. The report also highlights several key weaknesses: insufficient integration of fundamental rights in evaluations, slow progress in meeting commitments in Member States' action plans, excessive administrative burdens on these states, a shortage of experts in critical areas like data protection and visa policy (with one-third of experts from the same Member States), and an inadequate system for managing the Schengen situation, with European Parliament involvement lacking a systematic approach (Zsákai, 2023).

In addition to identifying gaps and problems, the report also developed concrete possible operational measures:

- Streamlining internal workflows and setting benchmarks to reduce the length of processes;
- Develop new training in the field of water policy and consolidate existing training to encourage and improve participation;
- Updating the checklists to focus on key elements that could affect the Schengen area as a whole;
- Making the use of unannounced evaluations and thematic evaluations more strategic;
- Improving synergies and cooperation with EU agencies and national quality assurance mechanisms;
- To simplify further reports and shift the focus of recommendations;
- Detailed development and expansion of catalogues of best practices; and
- Adoption of the annual report to facilitate policy exchange. ([URL1](#))

The European Commission has made it clear in its report mentioned above - which, in addition to the comments developed by the Schengen Governance Unit, is primarily based on the experience and opinions of the Member States - that the Schengen evaluation and monitoring mechanism needs to be renewed in the future: 'it has also become apparent that for the mechanism to work fully effectively in the future it is essential to complement the operational improvements with legislative changes needed to bring clarity and reinforce existing rules and procedures' ([URL1](#)).

Interview findings

The results of the research, conducted through semi-structured interviews, indicate that the second generation of Schengen evaluations has provided some lessons that point to the need for future reform of the system. I conducted the semi-structured interviews with a total of 12 individuals, all of whom were actively involved in the previous Schengen evaluation system (second generation) and are currently involved in the functioning of the renewed system as evaluators, coordinators, or representatives of Member States and the Commission. Among the interviewees were seven Hungarian Schengen evaluation experts, one national coordinator from the Ministry of Interior, two diplomats who actively participated in the development of the new evaluation system at Hungary's Permanent Representation to the European Union, and two representatives from the European Commission involved in organizing and coordinating the evaluations. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and via videoconference (on the Microsoft Teams platform) between April 1, 2024, and May 31, 2024. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes. I chose the semi-structured interview format intentionally, combining elements of both structured and unstructured interviews. This allowed participants to share deeper insights on certain topics and, when I found it relevant, to deviate slightly from the pre-prepared questions.

In general, interview respondents highlighted several problems in the implementation. The main objective prior to the establishment of this Regulation was to improve the quality of the evaluation process. The slowness of evaluations (partly caused by the slow administrative processes of the Commission) has hampered efficient and rapid evaluation processes. In addition, the mechanism has placed a relatively heavy burden on Member States, especially in the follow-up (monitoring) processes.

The unstructured nature of the evaluation processes was also a challenge. Between the time when Member States sent the Commission the preliminary comprehensive questionnaires prior to the on-site visits and the evaluations, there were many changes which, in many cases, Member States did not have the opportunity to review and subsequently adapt (adapt to current realities). In addition, experience showed that neither the Commission nor Member State experts made substantial use of the Member States' questionnaires completed by Member States prior to the on-site evaluations, with evaluators focusing more on the time-consuming on-site questions. A common experience across all evaluation disciplines was that the questions asked by the evaluators during the on-site visits were often unstructured and ad-hoc, which also called into question

the reliability and validity of the process. The system of evaluator reports was fragmented, and the adoption of reports often took a long time (up to one year), especially for reports on evaluations carried out in the field of data protection evaluation.

During the interviews, it became clear that coming up with recommendations following the Schengen evaluations was somehow lengthy. Due to linguistic differences (e.g. incorrect translation of technical terms into the official language of the Member State involved) and not always specific wording, these recommendations were often not made in the way they were initially intended or, most problematically, due to the dynamic change in the actualities and challenges, they became outdated or out of date before they were implemented.

One of the most critical lessons learned relates to the professionalism of the evaluation teams. The interviewees found that a significant proportion of the evaluation team members' professional competence was sometimes problematic which is in close connection with the training of experts. Through the analysis of the interviews, it is shown that although Frontex, CEPOL, and Europol have been conducting trainings for years in areas such as external border management, return procedures, the operation of the Schengen Information System, and police cooperation, there has not been an adequate and comprehensive training programme for future evaluators in the fields of common visa policy and data protection. Additionally, the agencies faced difficulties in finding suitable presenters and trainers to carry out the training sessions. The absence of robust training programmes in key areas, such as common visa policy and data protection, has led to significant competency gaps among evaluators. Many evaluators had not only the lack of foundational expertise but also practical experience gained directly in the field. There was also no set minimum experience requirement, which contributed to inconsistencies in evaluators' skill levels and preparedness. Consequently, this variability has impacted the quality of evaluations, often causing evaluators to rely heavily on theoretical frameworks without the practical insight necessary for on-the-ground assessments. A frequent issue has been that evaluators asked questions that are overly 'rigid' or detached from real-world implementation needs, creating confusion during evaluations. This lack of practical orientation often lead evaluators to focus on abstract questions that do not align with the day-to-day realities of Schengen acquis implementation. Such an approach has often been confusing for those being evaluated, as the questions do not always address the core functions or immediate challenges of their roles. Moreover, evaluators often repeat questions from the pre-filled questionnaires, resulting in redundancy instead of deepening the evaluation process. These repetitive questions are sometimes directed at personnel who are not

directly involved in operational tasks, which further undermines the relevance and utility of the evaluations. This approach could miss critical insights from on-field staff, whose practical input could provide valuable context for understanding the effectiveness of Schengen policies in action. Compounding these challenges, agencies have also faced persistent difficulties in securing qualified trainers and presenters to deliver training programs. This shortage not only affects the technical depth of the training but also its practical applicability, as there are few experts who can provide evaluators with a real-world perspective on Schengen operations.

The involvement of EU agencies in evaluations also proved challenging, as there was no legal obligation (in the case of the previous Scheval Regulation) for these agencies to provide an observer/co-operator for evaluations. (former Regulation of the Council on the schengen evaluation mechanism, 2013) The involvement of the Fundamental Rights Officer as an observer was also not assessed as sufficiently effective, as all subjects of interviews stressed that in several cases, these observers subjectively influenced the audit processes and gave - irregular - suggestions to the experts for the preparation of the report.)

During the semi-structured interviews, I asked the interviewees guiding questions concerning their views on the content of the Commission's report on the shortcomings of the second generation of Schengen evaluations. This report has highlighted several shortcomings, divergent practices and elements that hamper the effective implementation of evaluations and reduce their added value. (Commission report on Scheval, 2020). Several interviewees pointed out that the problems identified in the report had been highlighted by the Commission in several workshops for senior evaluators. Interviewees agreed that the Commission's report was a welcome step, as experience had clearly shown that the Schengen evaluation system needed to be reformed. On the European Commission side, interviewees said that the report's writing had started in early 2020 and that the main issues, which had been repeatedly raised by both the Commission and the Member States, had been confirmed, considering different aspects. The Commission has presented what it could, backed up by statistics, to show what the real operational and strategic problems and gaps are. However, the interviewees concerned also added that there was a lack of consensus within the Commission on proposed solutions to address these, such as how to remedy the slow pace of implementation.

Conclusions

The previous (second) generation of Schengen evaluations was based on the previous EU Council Regulation 1053/2013. The Commission's report, published in 2020, is a strategic milestone for the first five-year programme of the Schengen evaluation system, which the 2013 Scheval Regulation established. The comprehensive and complex report was prepared with the active involvement of Member States and EU bodies and institutions, and aimed to analyse the operational effectiveness and coherence of the Schengen area. It highlights the challenges to the coherent functioning of the Schengen system and the need for coordination between Member States. By eliminating inconsistent implementations and introducing standard evaluation practices, closer cooperation between the EU institutions and the Member States can contribute to the future sustainable and efficient functioning of the Schengen area. These improvements can contribute to upholding the principle of border-free travel and strengthening the EU's internal security.

Member States have experienced a significant workload during the evaluation processes, especially in the follow-up phase after the on-site visits. Discrepancies between on-site visits and ex-ante questionnaires and shortcomings in expert preparedness further complicated the situation. The involvement of EU agencies has been problematic, and the adoption of reports has often proved lengthy, highlighting the need to reform the Schengen evaluation system. A renewal of the Schengen mechanism has undoubtedly become inevitable, and the reform has been launched in 2021.

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Laws and regulations

- Council Regulation (EU) No 1053/2013 of 7 October 2013 establishing an evaluation and monitoring mechanism to verify the application of the Schengen acquis and repealing the Decision of the Executive Committee of 16 September 1998 setting up a Standing Committee on the evaluation and implementation of Schengen
- Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation)
- Report from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on the functioning of the Schengen Evaluation and Monitoring Mechanism pursuant to Article 22 of Council Regulation (EU) No 1053/2013 First Multiannual Evaluation Programme (2015–2019)

Online link in the article

URL1: *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the first annual report on the screening of foreign direct investments into the Union*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0779>

Reference of the article according to APA regulation

Zsákai, L. (2025). Operation and experiences of the second generation of the Schengen evaluation system. *Belügyi Szemle*, 73(7), 1469–1482. <https://doi.org/10.38146/BSZ-AJIA.2025.v73.i7.pp1469-1482>

Statements

Conflict of interest

The author has declared no conflict of interest.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethics

No dataset is associated with this article.

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