



## Press Release

Luxembourg, 20 May 2021

### EU e-waste targets difficult to achieve

**Collectively, EU Member States collect and recover more discarded electrical and electronic equipment than most of the world. But the EU risks missing its more ambitious e-waste collection targets. A review by the European Court of Auditors (ECA) points out a number of challenges, for instance the need to ensure and check compliance with the existing rules, and with the problem of breaches and criminal activities, such as illegal shipments to countries outside the EU.**

E-waste – discarded electrical and electronic tools, household appliances and even large equipment such as photovoltaic panels – is harmful to the environment if it is not treated properly. E-waste also often contains recyclable materials such as metals and plastics. It can therefore contribute to the circular economy. For instance, 1 tonne of smartphones contains about 100 times more gold than 1 tonne of gold ore.

*“The collection and recovery of e-waste in the EU has improved over time, and the EU currently recycles about 80 % of the e-waste it collects,”* said Joëlle Elvinger, the ECA member responsible for the review. *“However, the collection, recycling and reuse of e-waste are not equally effective in all Member States, and could be further increased. We also observed some challenges in the way the EU deals with the mismanagement of e-waste, illegal shipments and other criminal activities.”*

The EU has met its past e-waste collection and recovery targets, and has subsequently set itself more challenging ones. Up-to-date data on the new targets is not available yet. In fact, only two Member States appear to be on track to achieving the collection targets set for 2019. The auditors note that there have been steps in the right direction, such as incorporating circular-economy requirements into legislative proposals (e.g. “eco-design”), incentivising the reduction of material usage, and promoting reparability and durability of products. However, those updated “eco-design” requirements do not yet cover certain popular varieties of electrical and electronic equipment, like mobile phones and computers. The ECA sees this review as potential food for thought for the European Commission in drawing up the “Circular Electronics Initiative”, planned for the last quarter of 2021.

Over time, the EU has improved its legislation on e-waste. However, EU countries often face difficulties in enforcing EU legislation: for instance, according to the auditors, mismanagement in the way e-waste is treated (e.g. the removal and depollution of potentially toxic substances or other components) may occur, frequently due to poor or infrequent inspections and controls. Some Member States lack the resources to properly check operators and waste shipments outside the EU. The economic incentives for

*The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors’ review. The full review is available at [eca.europa.eu](https://eca.europa.eu).*

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illegal or unsound waste management are large, while the risks of getting caught are generally low. Dealing with criminal activity therefore constitutes a considerable challenge in the management of e-waste.

### **Background information**

ECA review 04/2021 “*EU actions and existing challenges on electronic waste*” is available on [eca.europa.eu](https://eca.europa.eu) in 23 languages. This review is not the result of an audit but rather an analysis of publicly available information or material specifically collected for this purpose.

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