

2012 discharge: EU general budget, European Ombudsman

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PURPOSE: presentation by the Commission of the consolidated annual accounts of the European Union for the financial year 2012, as part of the 2012 discharge procedure.

Analysis of the accounts of the EU Institutions: **Section VIII – European Ombudsman.**

Legal reminder: the consolidated annual accounts of the European Union for the year 2012 have been prepared on the basis of the information presented by the institutions and bodies under Article 129(2) of the Financial Regulation applicable to the general budget of the European Union. They were prepared in accordance with Title VII of the Financial Regulation and with the accounting principles, rules and methods set out in the notes to the financial statements.

The objective of the financial statements is to provide information about the financial position, performance and cashflow of a body that is useful to a wide range of users. The objective is to provide information that is useful for decision making, and to demonstrate the accountability of the entity for the resources entrusted to it.

1) Purpose: the document helps to bring insight into the EU budget mechanism and **the way in which the budget has been managed and spent in 2012.** It recalls that the European Union's operational expenditure covers the various headings of the financial framework and takes different forms, depending on how the money is paid out and managed. In accordance with the Financial Regulation, the Commission implements the general budget using the following methods: direct or indirect centralised management (by means of bodies or agencies of public law or other); decentralised management where the Commission delegates certain tasks for the implementation of the budget to third countries; and, thirdly, shared management where budget implementation tasks are delegated to Member States, in areas such as agricultural expenditure and structural actions.

The document also presents the different financial actors involved in the budget process (accounting officers, internal officers and authorising officers) and recalls their respective roles in the context of the tasks of sound financial management.

Amongst the other legal elements relating to the implementation of the EU budget presented in this document, the paper focuses on the following issues:

- accounting principles applicable to the management of EU spending (business continuity, consistency of accounting methods, comparability of information ...);
- consolidation methods of figures for all major controlled entities (the consolidated financial statements of the EU comprise all significant controlled entities –institutions, organisations and agencies);
- the recognition of financial assets in the EU (tangible and intangible assets, financial assets and other miscellaneous investments);
- the way in which EU public expenditure is committed and spent, including pre-financing (cash advances intended for the benefit of an EU organ);
- the means of recovery following irregularities detected;
- the modus operandi of the accounting system;
- the audit process followed by the European Parliament's granting of the discharge.

To recap, **the final control is the discharge of the budget for a given financial year.** The discharge represents the political aspect of the external control of budget implementation and is the decision by which the European Parliament, acting on a Council recommendation, "releases" the Commission from its responsibility for management of a given budget by marking the end of that budget's existence.

The document also details specific expenditure of the institutions, in particular: i) pensions of former Members and officials of institutions; ii) joint sickness insurance scheme and iii) buildings.

Lastly, the document presents a series of tables and detailed technical indicators on (i) the balance sheet; (ii) the economic outturn account; (iii) cashflow tables; (iv) technical annexes concerning the financial statements.

2) Implementation of appropriations under Section VIII of the budget for the financial year 2012: the document comprises a series of detailed tables, the most important concerning the implementation of the budget. Concerning the Ombudsman's expenditure, the table on the financial and budgetary implementation of this institution is presented as follows (information drawn from the [European Ombudsman's Report on the Budgetary and Financial Management 2012](#)).

- Budgeted appropriations 2012 EUR 9.516 million;
- Commitments: EUR 9.354 million (rate of commitments entered into: 98.30%);
- Payments: EUR 8.440 million (implementation rate of 85.62%).

3) Budget 2012- conclusions: in more general and political terms, the Ombudsman's budgetary implementation for the financial year 2012 was chiefly marked by the following activities (see European Ombudsman Annual Report 2012):

- **a record number of opening and closure of inquiries:** 465 inquiries opened, an increase of 18% compared to 2011 and an increase in the closure of inquiries for 23% compared to 2011 reaching a new peak at 390;
- the Ombudsman helped **over 22 000 individuals** by dealing with their complaints (2 442 cases), providing a reply to their requests for information (1 211), or offering advice through the interactive guide on our website (19 281);
- **the total number of complaints submitted to the Ombudsman fell for the fourth consecutive year:** this figure has gone from a high of 3 406 complaints in 2008 to 2 442 in 2012, mainly because fewer people are complaining to the Ombudsman for the wrong reason. Almost 60% of complaints processed in 2012 fell within the competence of a member of the Network. Just over half of these cases (30% of the total) fell within the European Ombudsman's mandate. In terms of complaints outside the mandate, the figure, at 1 720, is the lowest in ten years;
- **most inquiries (69%) were completed within one year**, improving slightly on the 2010 result (66%). This was achieved with an establishment plan that totalled 66 posts in 2012;
- **improvement in interinstitutional administrative cooperation** to avoid unnecessary duplications of staff (in the European Parliament for accounting, technical services concerning telecommunications, translation and interpretation; the Official Publications Office; the Paymaster's Office (PMO) of the European Union as regards pensions; the Translation Centre).