2018 discharge: EU general budget, European Economic and Social Committee

2019/2060(DEC) - 13/05/2020 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament decided by 669 votes to 10, with 11 abstentions, to **postpone its decision** on the discharge to the Secretary-General of the European Economic and Social Committee in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Economic and Social Committee for the financial year 2018.

In the resolution accompanying its discharge decision (adopted by 638 votes to 39, with 16 abstentions), the European Parliament made a series of observations:

Anti-harassment policy

Parliament recalled that between July and November 2018, the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) received accusations of harassment from five different sources concerning a member of the Committee, who has been chairman of the Employers' Group (Group I) since April 2013, and that OLAF decided to open an investigation on 6 November 2018.

Following the report and recommendations submitted by OLAF to the President of the Committee on 17 January 2020, Members expressed concern that OLAF concluded that harassment against two staff members, inappropriate behaviour (serious misconduct) against one staff member and one member of the Committee and misconduct against other staff members had been committed, and that it had also decided to refer the matter to the Belgian authorities.

Parliament gave the Committee until September 2020 to inform the discharge authority of the measures taken to follow up OLAF's recommendations and to sanction these wrongdoings. The Committee was asked to put in place a plan of action to actively prevent and combat harassment in the workplace, to raise awareness of harassment and to promote a culture of zero tolerance of harassment.

Budgetary and financial management

Parliament welcomed the Court of Auditors' conclusion that the payments concerning the European Economic and Social Committee's administrative expenditure for the financial year ended 31 December 2018 were, taken as a whole, free from material error and that the supervisory and control systems examined were effective.

In 2018, the Committee's budget amounted to EUR 135 630 905, compared to EUR 133 807 338 in 2017, an increase of 1.36 %. The overall implementation rate was 98.66 % (compared to 96.5 % in 2017 and 97.2 % in 2016). Members are concerned, however, that the final appropriations for Members' travel expenses and allowances (EUR 20 247 625 in 2018) increased slightly despite the decrease in the number of meetings. They also regretted that many of the appropriations automatically carried over from 2017 to 2018 have been significantly overestimated, reminding the Committee of the importance of making a realistic adjustment to the budget in line with real needs.

Parliament noted that the administrative cooperation agreement concluded by the Committee, the Committee of the Regions and Parliament in 2014 had expired on 31 December 2019, as the agreement

had not been renegotiated or extended. If a new agreement is negotiated, Members acknowledged that, from a political point of view, the agreement would need to be updated to meet current challenges, such as the new multiannual financial framework or the new rules on cohesion policy.

Other comments

Parliament expressed its concern about the confirmation of the presence of asbestos in critical areas of the VMA building, including the parking area. Deploring the lack of information for stakeholders and Members and staff, it invited the Committee to remedy the situation.

The Committee was also invited, *inter alia*, to:

- eliminate all measures that could weaken the legal service in the exercise of its corresponding activities and functions and ensure that its legal service has a sufficient number of staff to perform its duties and is able to keep its independence;

- ensure full transparency at all stages of the recruitment procedure (publication, selection, appointment and entry into service), without any exception, as provided for in the Rules of Procedure;

- continue its rationalisation measures in the area of translation;

- develop a long-term human resources policy framework, taking into account the work-life balance of its staff, lifelong guidance and career development, gender balance, teleworking, non-discrimination, geographical balance and the recruitment and integration of people with disabilities;

- analyse further the situation in order to identify additional areas for joint services with the Committee of the Regions;

- implement the new digital strategy and the new multi-annual IT spending plan as soon as possible.

In general, Parliament highlighted the work achieved in recent years on issues such as performance-based budgeting, the ethical framework and the many related rules and procedures, enhanced communication activities and the increasing number of measures to improve transparency. It underlined the importance of collaboration and of sharing of experience among Union institutions and bodies and suggested that an analysis be made of the possibility of formalised networking activities in different domains in order to share best practises and to develop common solutions.