2019 discharge: General budget of the EU - European Economic and Social Committee

2020/2145(DEC) - 25/03/2021 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Budgetary Control adopted the report by Olivier CHASTEL (Renew Europe, BE) calling on the European Parliament to grant discharge to the Secretary-General of the European Economic and Social Committee discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Economic and Social Committee for the financial year 2019.

Members welcomed the conclusion of the Court of Auditors, according to which the payments as a whole for the year ended on 31 December 2019 for administrative and other expenditure of the European Economic and Social Committee were free from material error. No significant weaknesses were identified in respect of the audited topics relating to human resources and procurement.

Budgetary and financial management

In 2019, the Committee's budget amounted to EUR 138 502 768 (compared to EUR 135 630 905 in 2018) with an implementation rate of 98.1 % (compared to 98,7 % in 2018). Members welcomed the fact that the implementation rate of appropriations carried forward from 2018 to 2019 was 82.1 % as compared to 77.5 % for appropriations carried forward from 2017 to 2018.

Regarding travel expenses, Members regretted that the Committee's bureau in 2020 adopted a decision allowing for the reimbursement of expenses for remote participation in cases where a member was prevented from travelling to Brussels as a result of COVID-19 related issues. They called on the Committee to withdraw this decision, which is not proportionate to the real cost of participation, represents a considerable loss for the Union budget and damages the reputation of the Committee.

Human resources

Members noted that the establishment plan indicates 668 posts in 2019, the same as in 2018. The total number of staff employed was 702 on 31 December 2019 (compared to 705 in 2018). Gender balance among the Committee's managerial staff reached parity in 2018 and remains relatively stable. The Committee is asked to report to the discharge authority on the concrete achievements of the action plan for equal opportunities and diversity, in particular on the results of the measures taken as regards strengthening diversity and making the Committee a more inclusive workplace for persons with disabilities.

Serious concern was expressed about the public disquiet caused by certain recruitment procedures used by the Committee.

Internal management

Members noted with concern that the Committee's total annual budget has increased from EUR 108 000 000 in 2006 to more than EUR 138 000 000 in 2019 while the overall number of opinions and reports produced by the Committee has decreased significantly (from 215 in 2018 to 127 in 2019). They understand that the reduction in opinions delivered may be connected to the electoral cycle but is concerned about the raise of the cost per opinion (EUR 1.1 million in 2019 compared to EUR 630 000 in 2018), and express concerns about the outsourcing to external companies of reporting work.

The report noted with concern that out of the 127 opinions and reports, only 55 were own-initiative opinions. The Committee is encouraged to increase its efforts to achieve a higher profile for its opinions.

On the other hand, the Committee is congratulated on the fact that in 2019 it had the highest take-up of e-invoices, in both absolute and relative terms, of all Union bodies.

Refusal of discharge in 2018, harassment and whistle blowing

Members recalled that several members of staff suffered acts of psychological harassment by the then president of Group I over a long period of time. They regretted that the anti-harassment measures in place in the Committee failed to tackle and remedy this case sooner because of the senior position of the member concerned. They also recalled that Parliament refused to grant the Committee's secretary-general discharge in respect of the financial year 2018, among other reasons on the ground of a flagrant breach of the duty of care and the lack of action by the administration, along with the financial consequences.

Even during the 2018 and part of the 2019 discharge procedures, the secretary-general was unable to provide sufficient, transparent and reliable information to Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control.