

2020 discharge: General budget of the EU - European External Action Service

2021/2115(DEC) - 04/05/2022 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament decided by 555 votes to 83, with 6 abstentions, to **grant discharge** to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) for the implementation of the budget of the European External Action Service (EEAS) for the financial year 2020.

Parliament found that the Court of Auditors did not identify any significant weaknesses in the EEAS during its audit of the areas of human resources and procurement. On the basis of its audit work, the Court concluded that the payments for the administrative expenditure of the institutions, including the EEAS, for the financial year 2020 were, taken as a whole, **free from material error**. No specific problems with the regularity of transactions were identified.

In its resolution, adopted by 545 votes to 84 with 12 abstentions, Parliament made the following observations.

Budgetary and financial management

The EEAS budget for 2020 was **EUR 731 000 000** (an increase of 5.2% compared to the budget for 2019, which was EUR 694 800 000), broken down as follows: EUR 276 300 000 for headquarters and EUR 454 700 000 for the delegations. EUR 212 400 000 from the Commission to cover the administrative costs of its staff working in delegations.

Overall, in 2020, the EEAS committed EUR 934 400 000, or 90% of the available budget for the year. EUR 919 200 000, or 79% of the available payment appropriations. Overall, the final EEAS budget for 2020 recorded a **commitment implementation rate of 95% and a payment implementation rate of 82.3%**, compared to 99.94% and 87.9% respectively in 2019.

During 2020, due to the pandemic, the change in intensity of the EEAS activities resulted in transfers, notably from human resources and mission budget lines to IT budget lines, which were efficient and result-oriented.

Human resources, equality and staff well-being

Overall, the EEAS had 4 643 employees in 2020 (compared to 4 474 in 2019). Overall, a total of 2 286 staff worked at headquarters and 2 357 in delegations. Parliament highlighted the high occupancy rate of posts, particularly in delegations, and a slightly lower rate at headquarters.

In a volatile international environment, Parliament noted that the strengthening of the EEAS' role in dealing with new challenges such as **disinformation** should be accompanied by a corresponding increase in staffing. It supported the EEAS's call for sufficient human resources to ensure the effectiveness of the Union's action as a global actor.

Parliament welcomed the fact that at the end of 2020 the overall **gender representation** was almost balanced, with women representing 48.65% of the staff. It welcomed the fact that the upward trend in the proportion of women reaching senior management positions continued in 2020, with women accounting for 27.3% of senior managers and 33.2% of middle managers. It regretted that only 27.4% of the Head of Delegation posts in 2020 were held by women.

Concerned about the gender imbalance in applications for management positions, Members called on the EEAS to explore strategies to encourage and facilitate female applications for management positions. They encouraged the EEAS to better promote its career opportunities and vacancies to national diplomats, international studies professionals, academia and civil society.

Parliament reiterated its concern about the **geographical representation** of EEAS staff, in particular as regards the posts of heads of delegation and middle and senior management. Stressing the importance of ensuring a balanced representation of countries that joined the Union after 2004 or later (EU13), it called on the EEAS to make significant progress towards achieving a balanced representation of Member States.

Members welcomed the fact that in 2020 the EEAS launched its first ever mandatory training for managers on how to create a harassment-free working environment.

Ethical framework and transparency

Parliament welcomed the adoption of the EU's global human rights sanctions regime in December 2020 and the adoption of the new EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy for the period 2020-2024.

Members called on the EEAS to monitor the posts of former heads of delegation, in view of their politically sensitive role and functions in the host countries, and to continue monitoring the professional activity of former senior officials until the end of the mandatory cooling-off period. They called on the EEAS to automatically request information on the intended occupation of senior members of staff leaving their positions.

Parliament believed that the highest ethical standards should be applied to avoid possible conflicts of interest, in particular with regard to heads of delegation. It encouraged the EEAS to join the transparency register, based on a service level agreement, in order to improve transparency by making public all meetings with all lobby groups that try to influence the policy implementation processes of the EU institutions.

Buildings and security

Acknowledging the complexity of managing EEAS buildings, Parliament noted that the office development projects carried out by the EEAS in 2020 have introduced mostly collaborative spaces while respecting the social distancing guidelines introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The EEAS manages 178 office buildings in the delegations, representing a total surface area of 275 000 m². The annual cost of the rented properties for the delegations amounts to EUR 61 800 000. At the end of 2020, the EEAS managed 148 residences for Heads of Delegation, with a total surface area of 84 000 m². Parliament supported the EEAS in its efforts to increase the use of **co-location** in its delegations, which has more than quadrupled in the last five years and represents 7% of the total office space.

Parliament pointed out that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU institutions saw a 600% increase in cyber attacks. It supported the EEAS in strengthening its security measures protecting both staff members and its digital infrastructure from external threats and attacks. The EEAS has allocated a total budget of EUR 65 600 000 for security services for 2020.

COVID-19 pandemic

Parliament underlined that the EEAS has been able to ensure the continuity of its activities and the sound financial management of its operations without having experienced any significant problems during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

Members commended the EEAS for the crucial role it played in the major emergency action to repatriate more than 600 000 stranded EU citizens worldwide, while contributing to the implementation of the large-scale humanitarian and assistance operation '**Team Europe**', which mobilised more than EUR 38 billion in support to partner countries and contributed EUR 850 million to COVAX, the global vaccine distribution initiative.