2021 discharge: General budget of the EU - European Ombudsman

2022/2088(DEC) - 22/03/2023 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Budgetary Control adopted the report by Mikuláš PEKSA (Greens/EFA, CZ) on the discharge for implementation of the European Union general budget for the financial year 2021, section VIII - European Ombudsman.

The committee responsible recommended that the European Parliament **give discharge** to the European Ombudsman in respect of the implementation of the European Ombudsman's budget for the financial year 2021.

Budgetary and financial management

The report notes that the Ombudsman's budget for 2021 amounted to **EUR 12 501 836**, which represents a slight increase of 1.2% compared to 2020. The most significant increase in the budget comes from rent and is due to the relocation of the Ombudsman's office to Brussels. The budget implementation rate was only 88.8% for the year 2021, which is a decrease compared to 2020, when the implementation rate was 94.9%. Budget implementation was heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Members welcomed the fact that the Ombudsman has concluded a wide range of service level agreements, in particular with the European Parliament and the Commission, which allow the institution to save money by not having to set up the structures necessary to manage these services.

Internal management, performance and control

The report notes that in 2021, the Ombudsman continued to implement the 'Towards 2024' strategy, which aims to create a new, simpler structure with fewer managers, encouraging more collaborative work and flexible and agile processes. It welcomed the fact that the Ombudsman had been able to significantly reduce the average time taken to deal with different types of cases in recent years: the average time taken to deal with a complaint had fallen from **78 days in 2018 to 29 days in 2021**.

Stressing that public access to documents is a major priority for the Ombudsman, accounting for up to one in four inquiries, Members support the Ombudsman's call to modernise EU legislation on access to documents and bring it more into line with citizens' rights.

Human resources, equality and staff well-being

In 2021, the Ombudsman had 74 staff members, which is almost unchanged from the end of 2020. The number of EU nationalities represented among the staff was 18, unchanged from 2020. The Ombudsman is encouraged to continue its efforts to achieve a balanced geographical distribution of nationals from all Member States within its staff (particularly at management level).

The report notes that 68% of the Ombudsman's total staff are women, which represents a slight increase compared to 2020. Furthermore, women make up the majority of all staff categories. No cases of harassment were reported in 2021.

Ethical framework and transparency

Members welcome the fact that the Ombudsman has a dedicated page on ethical conduct on the Ombudsman's office intranet and that internal rules on assignments and staff mandates were adopted in 2021. They commend the Ombudsman for systematically using the Transparency Register to check that speakers or interlocutors at events or meetings organised by the Ombudsman are registered. No cases of conflict of interest were detected in 2021.

The report makes the following observations, *inter alia*:

- **IT expenditure** increased significantly in 2021. The Ombudsman did not suffer any cyber-attacks in 2021 and the institution relies mainly on the European Parliament to ensure that its level of cyber security is sufficient. The Ombudsman is encouraged to work closely with the European Union Agency for Cyber Security;

- 2021 was a year of transition in which the Ombudsman moved its Brussels office to **new premises** in October 2021, with a collaborative workspace;

- the Ombudsman's office has managed to significantly reduce the use of paper over the years through the digitalisation of processes;

- there is informal **cooperation** between the Ombudsman and OLAF, the European Prosecutor's Office and the Court to avoid duplication of investigations and to discuss areas of mutual interest such as conflicts of interest and revolving doors; the Ombudsman cooperates closely with the relevant committees of the European Parliament on important investigations;

- the Ombudsman continued to develop its **website** to make it easier for interested citizens to find inquiries and generally to make it more attractive to users.