2021 discharge: General budget of the EU - European External Action Service

2022/2090(DEC) - 31/03/2023 - 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 X - European External Action Service.

The committee responsible recommended that Parliament **give discharge** to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European External Action Service for the financial year 2021.

Budgetary and financial management

The report notes that, in 2021, the budget for the EEAS was **EUR 767 626 000**, representing an increase of 5.0% compared to 2020. The EEAS also disposed of an amount of EUR 211 200 000 from the Commission to cover the administrative costs of Commission staff working in Union delegations. The EEAS also received contributions to cover common costs of European Development Fund staff in Delegations, which brought the total budgetary amounts (commitment appropriations) managed by the EEAS to **EUR 1 091.1 million**.

In 2021, 99.4% of the final EEAS budget in commitments was executed, which is higher than in 2020 where 95.0% was executed. For payments 84.5% of the budget for 2021 was executed, slightly higher than 2020, where 82.3% was executed.

The final budget for the EEAS HQ, after transfers, amounted to EUR 295 million, while the final budget for EEAS delegations, after transfers, amounted to EUR 472.6 million.

Internal management, performance and control

Members note that in 2021, the EEAS carried out the largest reorganisation of its service since its creation in 2011, establishing six large geographical departments and an Office of the Secretary-General in order to better reflect the current geopolitical situation.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to have a significant impact on the working conditions of the EEAS in 2021. It created opportunities for the spread of disinformation and foreign manipulation and interference. In addition, the EEAS has been confronted with several security crises in Afghanistan, the Sahel and Ethiopia, in which it was rather late to inform and react to the changes on the ground, leading to speedy evacuations of Union personnel.

The report is pleased to note that all financial transactions in the EEAS budget recorded in the 2021 financial year are audited by means of random stratified samples based on a methodology similar to that used by the Court.

Human resources, equality and staff well-being

At the end of 2021, the EEAS employed 5 072 staff members, of whom 2 303 (45.4%) worked at EEAS headquarters and 2 769 (54.6%) in the Union's delegations and offices worldwide. **Women** represented 46.7% of EEAS staff, down slightly from 48.7% at the end of 2020. However, there has been a relative increase in the number of women in all management positions.

Members welcome the appointment of an EEAS Ambassador for Gender and Diversity to raise awareness and consideration in diplomacy, political dialogue and policy-making. They call for effective gender training strategies within the EEAS.

The report notes with satisfaction that **all Member States are represented** among the staff and that, in particular, the relative number of staff from the Member States that joined in 2004 or later (EU-13) has increased. However, it points out that significant disparities remain in management positions.

Members notes that, in 2021, the number of persons who were absent due to illness increased by 9.3%, while the number of days of absence due to illnesses increased by 36%. They consider that this is a relatively large increase and calls on the EEAS to investigate further if there is anything that can be done in terms of improving physical and mental work conditions to ensure that the situation improves in the coming years.

Ethical framework and transparency

Members welcome the recent adoption by the EEAS of the 'Principles of Professional Behaviour'. They note that the EEAS offers training in ethics in the framework of Newcomers Welcome Sessions and as part of pre-posting seminars for Union Ambassadors.

The report calls on the EEAS to **monitor the positions of former senior staff and heads of delegations**, given their sensitive political role. It invites the EEAS to systematically review potentially problematic transitions to the private sector or to third country organisations and to continue monitoring the occupation of former senior officials until the end of the mandatory cooling-off period.

The EEAS should ban all officials who have left the service from lobbying or advocacy.

In the interests of transparency, the EEAS is invited to publish all meetings held with interest groups of any kind, including those involving heads of EU delegations.

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

- the EEAS should take action to remedy the problems that led to the **errors in procurement** and to avoid future breaches of procurement rules. The EEAS is encouraged to put in place appropriate measures, such as better training or clarification of guidelines and templates for procurement documentation, to reduce the number of errors in procurement and recruitment procedures organised by EU Delegations and to inform the discharge authorities of the measures taken;

- the EEAS Security Information and Event Management (SIEM) solution generated more than 16 000 cyber alerts, resulting in the identification of 236 cyber-attacks: the EEAS should continue to **focus strongly on cyber security and hybrid threats**, in particular those supported by foreign states, and to work with other EU institutions and Member States to identify such threats;

- given the size and complexity of the EEAS **building stock**, it agrees that in Brussels and in most countries around the world where the Union can foresee to maintain a representation, it is likely that in the long-term savings can be made by owning rather than renting the buildings;

- the EEAS budget for **strategic communication** and public diplomacy activities in 2021 amounted to over EUR 26.17 million to support communication activities at headquarters and in all EU delegations. Members welcome the fact that communication priorities include areas such as the Union's values and interests, response to international health crises and climate action.