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

2022/2090(DEC) - 10/05/2023 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 553 votes to 82 with 5 abstentions, to **grant 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.

In its resolution, adopted by 544 votes to 81 with 9 abstentions, Parliament made the following observations:

Budgetary and financial management

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.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the budget for IT was increased during 2021, while the budget of various items including salaries was reduced.

Internal management, performance and control

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, leading to speedy evacuations of Union personnel. No Union Delegations submitted reservations in 2021.

Members are 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.

Parliament noted with concern, that the Court in five of the ten procurement procedures examined found some deficiencies in how the Union Delegations applied public procurement rules and found some

weaknesses in all eight of the recruitment procedures for local agents. The EEAS is called on to take action to resolve the problems leading to the procurement errors identified and to prevent future infringements of the relevant rules.

The EEAS is strongly encouraged to take appropriate measures, such as enhancing training and improving guidelines and templates for procurement documentation, in order to reduce the number of errors when it comes to procurement and recruitment procedures organised by Union Delegations.

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. Most of the increases took place in delegations and offices.

At the end of 2021, the staff comprised 1 706 officials and temporary staff, 1 543 local staff, 567 contract staff, 467 seconded national experts, 43 young professionals in the Union's delegations and 746 other external staff and trainees.

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. The EEAS is encouraged to increase the number of female heads of delegation and to engage in feminist diplomacy, particularly in third countries where gender equality standards are lower.

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

The resolution noted 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. Only 24 Member States are represented among the EEAS Ambassadors and the five Member States with most ambassadors (France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Belgium) have 82 out of 135 posts, equivalent to 61%.

Members noted 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 considered that this is a relatively large increase and called 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

Compliance with rules and standards of ethical behaviour and transparency is essential, especially for the EEAS, as it represents the Union's values worldwide. Members welcomed the recent adoption by the EEAS of the "Principles of Professional Behaviour". They noted that the EEAS offers ethics training as part of induction sessions for newcomers and as part of pre-posting seminars for EU ambassadors.

Parliament called on the EEAS to monitor the posts of former senior officials and heads of delegation, given their sensitive political role. It called on the EEAS to systematically examine potentially problematic transfers to the private sector or to third-country organisations and to continue monitoring the professional activity of former senior officials until the end of the mandatory waiting period. The EEAS should ban all officials who have left the service from engaging in any lobbying or advocacy activity for the duration of the cooling-off period.

It would be particularly relevant for the EEAS to join the **EU Transparency Register**. In the interests of transparency, the EEAS is invited to publish a list of all meetings held with interest groups of any kind, including those attended by heads of EU delegations. The use of external companies that continue to operate in Russia should be discontinued.

Parliament also commented on the digital transition, cyber security and data protection, buildings and security, environment and sustainability, inter-institutional cooperation and communication.

The resolution made the following observations, *inter alia*:

- investment in IT projects and equipment decreased by 6.4% to EUR 22 290 743, while investment in security increased by 24.6% to EUR 5 778 000; the EEAS continued to upgrade and renew technical equipment in 2021;

- 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 has put in place an Environmental Management System (EMS) covering areas such as energy saving, staff mobility, CO2 emission ceilings for service cars, information technology, green procurement, recycling and waste sorting, etc., to be progressively improved;

- agreements have been reached between the EEAS and the Commission on the exchange of restricted documents, and an establishment agreement for the EU delegation in the UK has been signed;

- 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.