2021 discharge: European Union Agency for Railways (ERA)

2022/2113(DEC) - 10/05/2023 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament decided to **grant discharge** to the Executive Director of the European Union Agency for Railways in respect of the implementation of the Agency's budget for the financial year 2021 and to approve the closure of the accounts for that year.

Noting that the Court of Auditors stated that it had obtained reasonable assurance that the Agency's annual accounts for the financial year 2021 were reliable and that the underlying transactions were legal and regular, Parliament adopted, by 570 votes to 36 with 20 abstentions, a resolution containing a series of recommendations which form an integral part of the discharge decision and which complement the general recommendations contained in the resolution on the performance, financial management and control of EU agencies.

Agency's financial statements

The Agency's final budget for the financial year 2021 was EUR 31 827 678, representing an increase of 3.45 % compared to 2020.

Budgetary and financial management

Budget monitoring efforts during the financial year 2021 resulted in a budget implementation rate of current year appropriations of 99.82 %, representing a slight decrease of 0.16 % compared to 2020. Payment appropriations execution rate was 93.54 %, representing an increase of 4.25 % compared to 2020. Budget outturn in 2021 was EUR 69 638, down from EUR 114 225 in 2020.

Parliament acknowledged the challenges which the Agency faced in budget execution in 2021, including with regard to the efforts made to absorb as fast and effectively as possible the IT security budget of around EUR 1.3 million assigned by the Commission in May 2021 to strengthen the Agency's IT security capabilities. The agency is commended for: (i) the implementation of around 81 % of that budget despite the limited timeframe; (ii) taking measures taken to mitigate the effects of understaffing by increasing the hourly rate applied by the Agency for authority tasks-related activities.

Other observations

Parliament also made a series of observations concerning performance, staff policy, procurement and internal control.

In particular, it noted that:

- the Agency reported a 76.41 % achievement of its 2021 annual programme (compared to 59.35 % in 2020). While most key performance indicators have been achieved, some important ones have still not been achieved, such as those related to gender equality audit, to the closure of pre-2021 audit findings (12 out of 14 actions opened at the beginning of 2021 having been postponed to 2022) and the presence of women in the transport sector;

- 2021 was the European Year of rail, and highlighted rail as one of the most sustainable, innovative, and safest transport modes available;

- on 31 December 2021, the establishment plan was 98 % implemented, with 148 temporary agents appointed out of 151 temporary agents authorised under the Union budget (compared to 148 authorised posts in 2020). Once again, the lack of gender balance is of concern in senior management;

- the original procurement plan has been updated throughout the year by adding EUR 350 000 for a new call for tenders and EUR 228 000 for an amended framework contract. The Agency carried out 4 open calls for tenders, 4 negotiated procedures and 2 reopening of competition in 2021;

- the Agency should participate in the newly established interinstitutional agreement on a mandatory transparency register for interest representatives, signed by the Commission, the Council and Parliament;

- the Internal Audit Service of the Commissions (IAS) carried out a risk assessment to identify areas for prospective audits for the Agency in the next years (2021-2023);

- an internal investigation has been opened by OLAF in 2021, which is still ongoing;

- the Agency introduced valuable measures to strengthen its cybersecurity following attacks in 2021;

- the Agency should concentrate its operations in one location only. Parliament noted the Agency’s commitment not to renew the contract lease for the premises in Lille and to limit the travels to Lille to mandatory meetings. Due to the Agency’s evolution into an Union authority, the current Agency headquarters’ building in Valenciennes no longer satisfies the necessary requirements for accommodating the Agency’s staff and activities.