

2022 discharge: General budget of the EU - European Ombudsman

2023/2137(DEC) - 11/04/2024 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament decided by 580 votes to 8, with 17 abstentions, to grant the European Ombudsman discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Ombudsman for the financial year 2022.

In its resolution, adopted by 585 votes to 9 with 15 abstentions, Parliament made the following observations:

In its Annual Report for the financial year 2022, the Court of Auditors stated that it did not identify any specific issues concerning the Ombudsman. Members noted that 14 (23 %) of the 60 transactions contained errors but that the Court, based on the five errors which were quantified, estimates the level of error to be below the materiality threshold.

Budgetary and financial management

The Ombudsman's budget amounted to **EUR 12 222 108** in 2022, which represents a decrease of EUR 280 000 compared to 2021. This decrease is the result of a rationalisation of the budget based on actual needs.

The budget implementation rate was **96.97 %** in 2022, which is higher compared to the previous year, when the implementation rate was 88.8 % due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The resolution noted that the Ombudsman did not report any impact from the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine on its 2022 budget for missions, procurement or building.

Internal management, performance and internal control

Members underlined that in 2022, noticing the flagrant absence of public information, the Ombudsman anticipatorily asked the European Commission how it will ensure transparency in the negotiations of national recovery plans, how it will guarantee public scrutiny of milestones reached by Member States, and how it will supervise the audits.

The Ombudsman received 2 223 complaints in 2022, compared to 2 192 in 2021, 35 % of which were within the Ombudsman's mandate. Furthermore, the Ombudsman opened 348 inquiries, including 60 inquiries of public importance, and closed 330 inquiries in 2022 compared to opening 338 inquiries in 2021 and closing 305.

Members noted that public access to documents has continued to be a major priority for the Ombudsman in 2022, with 121 complaints received, the highest number recorded within a year, and inquiries resulted in 90 complaints. They welcomed the swift handling of cases in the area of public access to documents, recalling that restrictions on access to documents, particularly legislative documents, should be exceptional and limited to what is absolutely necessary.

Human resources, equality and staff well-being

The composition of the staff in terms of status and job profiles has remained stable in recent years, with a total of 74 staff members at the end of 2022, the same number as in 2021. It is regrettable, however, that the post of the Secretary-General has been vacant since 1 September 2022.

Members encouraged the Ombudsman to continue its efforts to achieve a balanced representation of women and men among its staff.

Ethical framework and transparency

The forms for the declarations of conflicts of interest, external activities, publications and exercising an occupational activity after leaving the Union public service were revised to ensure consistent application of the Staff Regulations and the internal rules.

Members regretted that the Ombudsman did not formally join the EU transparency register. Members regretted that the Ombudsman has not formally joined the EU's Transparency Register, even though it has aligned his practices with the principles of the Transparency Register. On the other hand, they welcomed the high degree of transparency achieved by the Ombudsman by the publication on its website of information on inquiries, missions, meetings and events in which the Ombudsman takes part.

Buildings

Parliament noted that, following the move of the Ombudsman Brussels' Office to new facilities provided by Parliament in 2021, the building was organised as a collaborative workspace with very few individual offices and flexible collaborative meeting facilities. The Ombudsman returned 20.5 % of the surface rented by Parliament in Strasbourg at the request of the latter and that its rent was subsequently reduced.

Interinstitutional cooperation

Members welcomed the financial and administrative savings achieved through inter-institutional cooperation, in particular the wide-range of service-level agreements concluded with the Parliament and the Commission and the participation in interinstitutional procurement procedures. They welcomed the cooperation that the Ombudsman maintains with the EPPO, the ECA and OLAF aiming to avoid duplication of investigations and discussing topics of mutual interest, such as the improvement of the Union's oversight framework.

Communication

The overall budget for communication and promotional activities increased from EUR 92 100 to EUR 132 400, i.e. 43.8 %, between 2021 and 2022. The Ombudsman is congratulated for developing a comprehensive communication strategy. Members welcomed the adoption of a new logo and visual identity to increase the visibility of the Ombudsman's work.

Parliament praised the Ombudsman for actively promoting digitisation to reduce the use of paper and facilitate the exchange and storage of documents. It encouraged the Ombudsman to work closely with the European Union's cybersecurity agency (ENISA) and suggested that regularly updated cybersecurity training programmes be offered to all Ombudsman staff.