Discharge 2023: EU general budget – European Council and Council

2024/2021(DEC) - 01/04/2025 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Budgetary Control adopted the report by Joachim Stanisaw BRUDZISKI (ECR, PO) on discharge in respect of the implementation of the general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2023, Section II – European Council and Council.

The committee called on the European Parliament to **postpone** its decision on granting the Secretary-General of the Council discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Council and of the Council for the financial year 2023.

State of play of the discharge procedure

Members deeply regretted that, since 2009, and again for the financial year 2023, Parliament has had to refuse discharge to the Council because the Council continues to refuse to cooperate with Parliament on the discharge procedure, preventing Parliament from taking an informed decision based on a serious and thorough scrutiny of the implementation of the Council's budget. They also regretted that, on 23 September 2024, the Secretariat informed Parliament once again that it would not be answering Parliament's questionnaire and that the Council would not be participating in the hearing organised on 12 November 2024 as part of the discharge process and in which all other invited institutions participated.

The report deplored that the Council, for more than a decade, has shown that it does not have any political willingness to collaborate with Parliament in the context of the annual discharge procedure. The Council is called on to resume negotiations with Parliament without undue delay and to actively engage with Parliament at the highest level as soon as possible in order to break the deadlock and resolve the long-standing discharge impasse. The report also stressed that a **revision of the Treaties** could make the discharge procedure clearer and more transparent by giving Parliament the explicit competence to grant discharge to all Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies individually. Pending such a review, the current situation must be improved through enhanced inter-institutional cooperation. The Council is urged to actively engage with the Parliament.

Political priorities

The report regretted that the Council exerts its prerogative in the nomination and appointment procedures for many Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies without taking into account the views of the interested parties or the recommendations of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF).

Members expressed deep concern over the Hungarian government's misuse of its role in the EU Presidency to pursue bilateral engagements that contradict the Union's core values, such as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin, despite Union sanctions and the International Criminal Court arrest warrant against the latter for war crimes. It noted with alarm similar engagements with other authoritarian leaders, undermining the EU's credibility. In this regard, they called on the Council to firmly condemn such actions and to take all necessary measures to ensure that Member States holding the Presidency act in alignment with EU principles, safeguarding the Union's integrity and values.

Budgetary and financial management

The report noted that the budget for Council was **EUR 647 908 757** for 2023, representing an increase of 6 % compared to 2022, which is higher than the increase of 2.3 % between 2021 and 2022. Members reiterated their regret that the budget of the European Council and the Council has **not been divided into two clearly separated budgets** as recommended by Parliament in previous discharge resolutions in order to improve transparency and accountability.

The overall implementation rate of the Council's budget in 2023 was **97%**. Appropriations carried over from 2023 to 2024 totalled EUR 85.5 million covering mainly computer systems, cost of interpretation provided in 2023, for which invoices have not been yet agreed with the European Commission services at the time of the closure, buildings, information and communication, audio-visual and conference equipment, other staff expenditure: and transport.

Members also expressed concern over insufficient control mechanisms regarding the Council's use of consultancy services and external contractors and called for full disclosure of all contracts exceeding EUR 50 000.

Human resources, equality and staff well-being

The report noted that, given the Council's lack of cooperation with Parliament, observations in this section primarily rely on aggregated information published on the Council's website which provides limited detail.

Out of 3 116 members of staff at the end of 2023, 79 % were permanent staff, 12.8% were temporary staff, 7.2% were contractual agents and 1% were seconded national experts. Members regretted the lack of publicly available information concerning the gender and geographical distribution of staff in the Secretariat.

Ethical framework and transparency

Members criticised that the code of conduct for the President of the European Council has not been brought in line with those of Parliament and the Commission, in particular in terms of post term-of-office activities. The Council is urged to establish stricter post-term employment rules for senior officials, including an extended cooling-off period and mandatory public disclosure of private-sector affiliations. It is also called on to make the participation of Member States' Permanent Representations in the EU Transparency Register mandatory.

Members called for stronger and harmonised ethics rules on conflicts of interest, revolving doors, and lobbying transparency.

Members strongly regretted that the Council continues to systematically withhold or delay access to legislative documents and the decision-making process in the Council is still far from fully transparent, thereby hindering public scrutiny of its decision-making, negatively affecting citizens' trust in the Union as a transparent entity and jeopardising the reputation of the Union as a whole.

Digitalisation

In 2023, the Secretariat continued to pursue its goal of digital transformation. Out of 113 digitalisation projects in the annual work plan, concerning, in particular, the areas of shared services, policy, legal and IT, 37 % were completed at the end of the year while 8 % were cancelled or merged and 38% were still ongoing. Members urged the Council to accelerate the implementation of secure digital voting and document-sharing systems to enhance efficiency, accountability, and reduce unnecessary paper-based processes.