

RESOLUTION (EU) 2019/1427 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**of 26 March 2019****with observations forming an integral part of the decision on discharge in respect of the implementation of the general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2017, Section VI — European Economic and Social Committee**

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT,

- having regard to its decision on discharge in respect of the implementation of the general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2017, Section VI — European Economic and Social Committee,
 - having regard to Rule 94 of and Annex IV to its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A8-0100/2019),
- A. whereas in the context of the discharge procedure, the discharge authority wishes to stress the particular importance of further strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the Union institutions by improving transparency and accountability, and implementing the concept of performance-based budgeting and good governance of human resources;
1. Welcomes the conclusion of the Court of Auditors (the 'Court'), according to which the payments as a whole for the year ended on 31 December 2017 for administrative and other expenditure of the European Economic and Social Committee (the 'Committee') were free from material error;
 2. Notes with satisfaction that, in its annual report on the implementation of the budget concerning the financial year 2017 (the 'Court's report'), the Court identified no significant weaknesses in respect of the audited topics relating to human resources and procurement for the Committee;
 3. Notes that in 2017 the Committee's budget amounted to EUR 133 807 338 (compared to EUR 130 586 475 in 2016), with an implementation rate of 96,5 % compared to 97,2 % in 2016; notes that the implementation rate of appropriations carried forward from 2016 to 2017 was higher than in 2016, 84,9 % (EUR 7,4 million) compared to 65,7 % in 2016 (EUR 6,8 million);
 4. Notes that the Committee's budget is mostly administrative, with a large amount being used for expenditure concerning persons, buildings, furniture, equipment and miscellaneous running costs;
 5. Welcomes the commitment of the Committee to extend the performance-based budgeting methodology to relevant parts of its budget; notes the regular review of the key performance indicators (KPIs) along with the secretariat's activities and organisation in this context; asks to be regularly informed about the achievements related to the application of the principles of performance-based budgeting;
 6. Encourages the Committee to publish its Annual Activity Report and Annual Accounts by 31 March of the year following the accounting year in question with a view to optimising and speeding up the discharge procedure;
 7. Notes that the final appropriations for travel and subsistence allowances for Members increased to EUR 19 819 612 in 2017 (compared to EUR 19 561 194 in 2016); welcomes the detailed list of travels by Members presented in the Annual Activity Report; welcomes measures that contribute to an efficient planning of meetings and reducing transportation costs;
 8. Notes that the Committee reduced the overall number of posts in its establishment plan by 59 posts, from 727 in 2013 to 665 in 2017, mainly due to the implementation of the 5 % staff cuts decision and the implementation of the cooperation agreement concluded in 2014 with Parliament; notes that the Committee adjusted its organisational structure, in particular through the merger of the directorate for human resources and the directorate for finance in May 2017;

9. Welcomes the inter-institutional administrative cooperation with Parliament and the mid-term evaluation results on the implementation of the cooperation agreement between the Committee and the Committee of the Regions, which highlights the successful implementation of several measures; notes that in the context of a redeployment exercise, the Committee has already moved 16 posts from the directorate for translation to its own services, and that remaining moves will happen progressively; notes the calculation of the budgetary savings made by the Committee and the Committee of the Regions through this inter-institutional cooperation, such as the savings, inter alia, in infrastructure costs amounting to EUR 12,5 million, in IT costs amounting to EUR 5 million, or in security staff costs amounting to EUR 500 000; calls on the Committee and the Committee of the Regions to continue to improve this inter-institutional cooperation in order to achieve further savings;
10. Takes note that the Committee adopted in 2017 a total of 155 opinions and reports, including 13 exploratory opinions on referral from the EU presidencies or the Commission, 59 opinions on referral from Parliament and Council, and 45 on referral from the Commission;
11. Notes that translation services are still in transition towards a higher degree of outsourcing due to the transfer of staff to Parliament under the cooperation agreement (with 16,61 % of the budget in 2016 being used for outsourced translation and 17,10 % in 2017); calls on the Committee to follow up the areas related to translation management requiring further attention from management highlighted by the internal audit service and wishes to be informed accordingly;
12. Notes that the rate of unused slots of interpretation services was 3,6 % in 2017 (compared to 4 % in 2016); encourages the Committee to keep a positive trend towards fewer cancellations;
13. Is interested in the work of the ad hoc group set up by the Committee's Bureau on the future of the Committee which aims to develop a new vision for the Committee and its role in a changing Union; notes that the group submitted its report in July 2017 with proposals on working methods and on the internal organisation; notes that the ideas presented in the report will progressively result in concrete actions and asks the Committee for more information in the next Annual Activity Report;
14. Highlights that only 11 posts were open in the Committee in 2017 (related to permanent posts) compared to 62 open posts in 2015 and welcomes that development;
15. Welcomes the increase in political dialogue between the Committee and Parliament as well as other intuitions; notes the Committee's active contribution to the inter-institutional cooperation on assessing Union policies and law in the framework of the agreement on better law-making and the Regulatory Fitness and Performance Programme (REFIT); encourages the Committee and Parliament to pursue their efforts in strengthening the political cooperation;
16. Welcomes the inter-institutional administrative cooperation with Parliament; notes with satisfaction the cooperation with the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) and the cooperation of the communication departments; welcomes the Committee's budgetary savings resulting from this inter-institutional cooperation, such as the savings in staff costs amounting to EUR 3,3 million (2016 salary levels) resulting from the transfer of 36 posts from the Committee to the EPRS;
17. Notes that as a result with the cooperation with Parliament, a total of 52 opinions were adopted in response to referrals coming from Parliament; Members of the Committee had over 60 meetings with Parliament's rapporteurs and shadow rapporteurs as well as other Members of Parliament, and participated in an active role in over 42 events in Parliament and in parallel, Members of Parliament actively participated in 35 Committee legislative work meetings; encourages the Committee to keep on working and to increase the cooperation with Parliament in legislative work;
18. As the interinstitutional costs of IT training, in particular in 2017, were influenced by inaccurate indicative prices, calls for a new service level agreement with the Commission in this area to avoid uncertainty by working with a single global amount for all training;
19. Welcomes the achievements made by the Committee in terms of communication activities to increase its visibility and media impact, including the increase of its outreach on social media; welcomes in particular the local debates organised in 27 Member States in the context of the Commission's reflection on the Future of Europe as well as other cultural events and the 221 Going Local activities;

20. Welcomes the efforts in the efficiency of information systems, IT infrastructure and user support services; notes the examples like the development of a new application for staff appraisals, an online staff vademecum, improved usability of the principal operational systems and reporting environments; notes, however, with concern that the Committee, together with Committee of the Regions, dedicated less than 3 % of their total budget to IT, whereas IT projects and equipment have suffered from underfinancing for several years; asks the Committee to prepare a mid-term strategy on the investments in their IT projects and equipment and include it into Committee's next Annual Activity report;
21. Notes the approval of a building strategy by the Committee's Bureau on 17 October 2017 and by the Bureau of the Committee of the Regions on 29 November 2017; notes that that building strategy provides a framework for any future decision related to the building policy to be taken and contains a set of guiding principles in the field of real estate; notes that several scenarios have been identified and explored in order to prepare the building policy beyond 2021 with a priority given to scenarios that include the continued use of the VMA building; asks to be kept informed about the ongoing negotiations with the Commission regarding the continued use of the VMA building; encourages the Committee, together with the Committee of the Regions, to carry out an assessment of potential renovation needs and to make an estimation of the costs for the scenario where the two Committees take over the entire VMA building;
22. Regrets the low participation of economic operators in the calls for tenders launched by the Committee; calls on the Committee to increase the publication efforts and to reduce the number of exceptional negotiated procedures with only one candidate and report back to the discharge authority on the progress;
23. Welcomes the results achieved with regards to the environmental management system through the joint cooperation between the Committee and the Committee of the Regions; notes with satisfaction the significant savings achieved in various fields, including a reduction of electricity consumption by 11 %, of gas consumption by 15 %, a reduction of paper by 11 % and a reduction of waste by 13 %; welcomes that the Committee together with the Committee of the Regions obtained the Label Good Food, awarded by the Brussels region to certify that the canteens of the Committees are managed in a sustainable way;
24. Welcomes the Committee's initiative to launch a staff survey on psycho-social risks at the end of 2016 in order to monitor the perception of stress-related issues by its staff; welcomes this close monitoring and actions to raise awareness at managerial and staff level, such as the Safety and Health at Work Week that were organised in October 2017; calls on the Committee to pursue its efforts in this regard, taking into account that the absence rate has been increasing since 2015 from 4 % to a 5,5 % in 2017, and to take all necessary measures to ensure the well-being of its staff; notes in this regard that occasional telework has decreased from 62,5 % in 2016 to 47,6 % in 2017;
25. Notes a slight increase of women in manager positions from 37,5 % in 2016 to 41,4 % in 2017; welcomes the Action Plan for Equal Opportunities and Diversity with around 25 suggested measures; is concerned that more than 80 % of members of staff requesting flexible working arrangements were women; suggests that the Committee adapts its policy with a view to encouraging more men to make use of these arrangements, in particular with a view to promoting their engagement in family life;
26. Notes the efforts made in terms of geographical balance, the percentage of managers coming from Member States who joined the Union in or after 2004 (EU13) increased to 16 % in 2017 and is now at 18,5 %; calls on the Committee to further pursue its efforts with a view to reaching the target of 20 % which reflects the proportion of the EU13 population compared to the total Union population;
27. Welcomes the appointment by the Committee of a team of four ethics counsellors in July 2018, following the adoption of Decision No 053/2016 of 2 March 2016 on a whistleblowing procedure;
28. Highlights the efforts of the Committee to work towards a consolidation of statutory and internal rules on ethical and respectful civil service behaviour; welcomes that aspects like the use of social media, the IT system and data protection are covered; notes the efforts undertaken together with its counterparts in the Committee of the Regions to apply rules to staff in a coherent manner, in particular where colleagues in the joint services are concerned; calls on the Committee to provide regular updates on the new comprehensive Ethics and Integrity framework;
29. Welcomes that the Committee has published the declarations of interests of the President and Vice-President under these Members' individual profiles on the Committee's website, as requested in the last discharge report;
30. Notes that members of staff must also declare their involvement in external activities in accordance with Article 11 of the Staff Regulations; urges the Committee to swiftly establish guidelines on the prevention of conflict of interests to be provided to all members of staff in response to the Decision of the European Ombudsman in case 1306/2014/OV;

31. Notes that the Director of Human Resources and Finance was appointed to the post of Secretary General on 14 November 2018; notes that he kept his former position, while arrangements are being made for the appointment of a successor; is concerned that the two functions are incompatible and urges the Committee to swiftly appoint a new Director of Human Resources and report back to the discharge authority;
 32. Notes that Members of the Committee have different professional backgrounds and may be used to different management cultures; notes that the political activities of the Members also imply certain management tasks, as their work is supported by their own staff and staff from the Secretariat; underlines the necessity of familiarising Members with the principles of the administrative culture of Union institutions to ensure dignity and respect at work;
 33. Welcomes the work of the network of confidential counsellors to actively prevent and tackle harassment in the working environment; notes that in 2017, 25 members of staff were given informal advice by the network; encourages the Committee to closely monitor the efficiency of its policy in this regard, to continue raising awareness about harassment at the work place and to continue fostering a culture of zero tolerance policy with regard to harassment; takes note of the ongoing reflection on procedures and sanctions concerning Members involved in harassment cases and urges the Committee to introduce rules and procedures in this regard by the next discharge procedure;
 34. Notes that the Council has not taken a decision yet about any change in the number of Committee Members and delegates following the decision of the United Kingdom to withdraw from the Union; asks the Committee to provide information of the direct budgetary impact of the decision, at the latest in the follow-up to the 2017 discharge; notes, moreover, that the United Kingdom's decision will have no direct consequence on Committee staff; welcomes the ongoing reflection on future relations with the United Kingdom after its departure and the Committee's willingness to maintain good relations with civil society.
-