



2026/1581

10.9.2026

RESOLUTION (EU) 2026/1581 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

of 29 April 2026

**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 2024, Section II –
European Council and Council**

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 2024, Section II – European Council and Council,
- having regard to Rule 102 of and Annex V to its Rules of Procedure,
- having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A10-0051/2026),
- A. whereas the democratic legitimacy of the Union institutions derives first and foremost from strict respect for the Treaties, which lay down the institutional balance and the clear distribution of competences; whereas transparency, accountability and sound financial management are essential obligations of all Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies when spending taxpayers' money; 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 by implementing the concept of performance-based budgeting and good governance of human resources;
- B. whereas, under Article 319 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), Parliament has the sole responsibility of granting discharge in respect of the implementation of the general budget of the Union, and whereas the budget of the European Council and of the Council (the 'Council') is a section of the Union budget and is therefore legally bound by the Treaties and the Financial Regulation to ensure transparency, accountability and sound financial management, irrespective of its intergovernmental nature;
- C. whereas, pursuant to Article 15(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the European Council is not to exercise legislative functions;
- D. whereas, under Article 317 TFEU, the Commission is to implement the Union budget on its own responsibility, having regard to the principles of sound financial management, and whereas, under the framework in place, the Commission is to confer on the other Union institutions the requisite powers for the implementation of the sections of the budget relating to them;
- E. whereas, under Articles 235(4) and 240(2) TFEU, the 'Council' is assisted by the General Secretariat of the Council (the 'Secretariat'), and whereas the Secretary-General of the Council is wholly responsible for the sound management of the appropriations entered in Section II of the Union budget;
- F. whereas, over the course of more than 20 years, Parliament has been implementing the well-established and respected practice of granting discharge to all Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies, and whereas the Commission supports that the practice of giving discharge to each Union institution, body, office and agency for its administrative expenditure should continue to be pursued;
- G. whereas, according to Article 59(1) of the Financial Regulation, the Commission shall confer on the other Union Institutions the requisite powers for the implementation of the sections of the budget relating to them;
- H. whereas, since the 2009 budget discharge, the Council's lack of cooperation in the discharge procedure has prevented Parliament from exercising its democratic scrutiny role and has repeatedly compelled Parliament to refuse to grant discharge to the Secretary-General of the Council;

- I. whereas the European Council and the Council, as Union institutions and as recipients of the general budget of the Union, should be transparent and democratically accountable to the citizens of the Union and subject to democratic scrutiny of the spending of public funds;
 - J. whereas Article 15(3) TFEU requires the Union institutions to ensure in their Rules of Procedure that their proceedings are transparent, while in several of its inquiries and decisions the European Ombudsman (the 'Ombudsman') has criticised the Council for its lack of transparency suggesting that the Council has failed fully to grasp the critical link between democracy and the transparency of decision-making;
 - K. whereas the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) confirms the right of taxpayers and of the public to be kept informed about the use of public revenue and that the General Court in its judgment of 25 January 2023 in Case T-163/21 ⁽¹⁾, *De Capitani v Council*, stated on transparency within the Union legislative process that documents produced by the Council in its working groups are not of technical nature but legislative and are therefore subject to access to documents requests;
1. Notes that the budget of the Council falls under MFF Heading 7, 'European public administration', which amounted to EUR 13,3 billion in 2023 (representing 6,9 % of the total Union budget); notes that the Council's budget of approximately EUR 0,7 billion represents 5,26 % of the total administrative expenditure of the Union;
 2. Notes that the Court of Auditors (the 'Court'), in its Annual Report for the financial year 2024 (the 'Court's report') examined a sample of 70 transactions under the heading 'Administration', the same number as in 2023, whereas the Court further states that administrative expenditure comprises expenditure on human resources, including expenditure on pensions, which in 2024 accounted for approximately 69 % of the total administrative expenditure, and expenditure on buildings, equipment, energy, communications and information technology (IT), and that its work over many years indicates that, overall, this spending is low risk;
 3. Notes that 16 (23 %) of the 70 transactions contained errors but that the Court, based on the three errors which were quantified, estimates the level of error to be below the materiality threshold; notes that the Court's report did not identify any specific issues concerning the Council;

State of play of the discharge procedure

4. Deeply regrets 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 despite Parliament's repeated efforts to establish constructive cooperation, thereby preventing Parliament from taking an informed decision based on a serious and thorough scrutiny of the implementation of the Council's budget;
5. Notes that, on 22 September 2025, the relevant Parliament services, on behalf of the rapporteur for the discharge procedure, forwarded a questionnaire to the Secretariat containing 103 important questions for Parliament in order to enable a thorough scrutiny of the implementation of the Council budget and of the management of the Council; further notes that similar questionnaires were sent to all other institutions, all of which have provided Parliament with detailed answers to all the questions;
6. Regrets that, on 3 October 2025, 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 6 November 2025 as part of the discharge procedure and in which all other invited institutions participated;
7. Reiterates Parliament's prerogative to grant discharge pursuant to Article 319 TFEU as well as the applicable provisions of the Financial Regulation and Parliament's Rules of Procedure in line with current interpretation and practice, namely the power to grant discharge in order to maintain transparency and to ensure democratic accountability to Union taxpayers;

⁽¹⁾ Judgment of the General Court of 25 January 2023, *De Capitani v Council*, T-163/21, ECLI:EU:T:2023:15.

8. Underlines that Article 59(1) of the Financial Regulation states that the Commission shall confer on the other Union institutions the requisite powers for the implementation of the sections of the budget relating to them and, therefore, finds it incomprehensible that the Council believes it appropriate that discharge should be granted to the Commission for the implementation of the Council budget;
9. Stresses the well-established and respected practice followed by Parliament over the course of more than 20 years of granting discharge to all Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies, including the Council; recalls that the Commission has declared its inability to oversee the implementation of the budgets of the other Union institutions; stresses the reiterated view of the Commission that the practice of granting discharge to each Union institution for their administrative expenditure and implementation of the Union budget should continue to be pursued directly by Parliament to preserve the compliance of the principle of sound financial management; recalls that all other institutions, bodies, offices and agencies cooperate fully with Parliament in the discharge procedure, and considers the Council's refusal to do so unjustified and incompatible with the principle of institutional loyalty under the Treaties;
10. Stresses that the current situation implies that Parliament can only check the reports of the Court and of the Ombudsman as well as the publicly available information on the Council's website, which makes it impossible for Parliament to make an informed decision on granting discharge; underlines that the lack of cooperation of the Council undermines Parliament's prerogative to effectively fulfil its oversight role;
11. Deplores the lack of political willingness from the Council, for more than a decade, to collaborate with Parliament in the context of the annual discharge procedure, thereby creating a structural blind spot in the Union's system of checks and balances, and that this has had a lasting negative effect on both institutions and has discredited the management and democratic scrutiny of the Union budget and on the trust of citizens in the Union as a transparent entity; stresses that such persistent institutional obstruction undermines the principle of sincere cooperation laid down in the Treaties; considers that continued non-cooperation risks further eroding the legitimacy of the Union's budgetary governance framework; underlines that the Council must adhere to the same standards of accountability and transparency as the other Union institutions;
12. Reiterates that the Council's continued refusal to engage in the discharge procedure is an unacceptable breach of democratic accountability; calls on the introduction of concrete and effective measures to ensure that any Union institution failing to comply with transparency obligations is held fully accountable, by exploring practical measures in line with Article 59(1) of the Financial Regulation, and the principle of sound financial management, that incentivise cooperation, including enhanced conditionality in administrative arrangements and reporting requirements;
13. Recalls that the case-law of the CJEU supports the right of taxpayers and the public to be kept informed about the use of public revenues; demands, therefore, full respect for Parliament's prerogative and role as guarantor of the democratic accountability principle; calls on the Council to duly follow up on the recommendations adopted by Parliament in the context of the discharge procedure and insists on the full application of Article 14(1) TEU;
14. Notes that on 6 May 2025, during his intervention in Parliament's plenary, the Representative of the Presidency of the Council expressed the latter's willingness 'to engage in a meaningful and pragmatic cooperation between our institutions' when it comes to discharge in relation to the Council section of the Union budget, and calls for this intention to be translated into concrete and immediate actions; calls therefore on the Council to resume negotiations with Parliament at the highest level as soon as possible, involving the Secretary-Generals and the Presidents of both institutions, in order to break the deadlock and find a solution that upholds the institutional competences of Parliament and the Council in the discharge procedure and ensures transparency and robust democratic control of the budget implementation; reiterates its request that the Commission and the Council legal services provide an opinion on potential Treaty-based solutions to enforce Council's accountability in the discharge procedure;
15. Stresses that, while the current situation has to be improved through better inter-institutional cooperation within the framework of the Treaties, 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; stresses, however, that pending such a review, the current situation must be improved through enhanced inter-institutional cooperation; urges in this sense the Council to actively engage with Parliament;

16. Notes that, despite the Council's longstanding unwillingness to cooperate in the discharge procedure, Parliament, nevertheless, highlights some political priorities and sets out some observations concerning the budgetary and financial management of the Council and other observations relevant for the discharge procedure in this report, in a manner that respects national sovereignty, the Treaties and the principle of sound financial management;
17. Notes that, given the Council's lack of cooperation with Parliament, observations in the following sections primarily rely on aggregated information published on the Council's website, which provides limited detail;

Political priorities

18. Recalls that in 2024 the Union agreed to provide predictable financial support to Ukraine through the Ukraine Facility for 2024-2027; stresses that, in this context, the Council and the Secretariat have a heightened responsibility to ensure transparency, integrity and sound financial management in all Council-related administrative spending connected to Ukraine-related decision-making, meetings and logistical arrangements, including clear reporting of related costs and contract management;
19. Regrets 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 interested parties or the recommendations of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF);
20. Notes with concern the Council's practice regarding appointments made by individual Member States for most positions which may limit the extent to which the professional qualifications of candidates are checked; insists, therefore, on the need for a review of the Council's prerogative with a view to guaranteeing and strengthening the participation of the institutions, bodies, offices and agencies concerned and increasing the legitimacy of those appointed; suggests that one possibility that could be put in place to ensure that candidates have the necessary qualifications would be to apply the same screening by an external panel used for the nominations of the judges and advocates-general of the CJEU;
21. Recalls that, pursuant to Article 286(2) TFEU, the Council appoints the members of the Court after consultation with Parliament; recalls that, on the basis of this prerequisite, Parliament delivers an opinion on the candidates; regrets that the Council has repeatedly disregarded Parliament's recommendations in its consultative role regarding the appointment of the members of the Court; recalls that although Parliament's opinion is non-binding on the Council, candidates who received an unfavourable opinion withdrew their candidatures by accepting Parliament's decision, thereby recognising the role of Parliament as the democratic supervisory authority linked to the safeguarding of the Union budget; calls on the Council to recognise Parliament's role by cooperating in the discharge procedure;
22. Stresses that the persistent gender imbalance among the Members of the Court undermines the Union's equality objectives; reiterates its call on the Council to address this issue by revising the nomination procedure and taking concrete measures, such as requiring Member States to submit at least two candidates of different genders, thus ensuring a more balanced and representative composition of the Court while respecting the principles of merit, excellence and equal opportunities;
23. Reaffirms its call for the creation of a Council of Defence Ministers as an institutional forum for political and strategic coordination; considers that a permanent and dedicated Council configuration on defence would reflect the need for the Union to assume greater responsibility for its own security and defence, complementing the establishment of a Security and Defence Committee in Parliament and a Commissioner for Defence and Space in the Commission;
24. Regrets that the Council has so far ignored Parliament's resolution of 17 December 2020 on the need for a dedicated Council configuration on gender equality and insists that a dedicated institutional forum would ensure stronger integration of gender equality in Union policies and strategies as well as essential coordination and progress in the main files related to gender equality;
25. Recalls that the judges and advocates-general of the Court of Justice are appointed by common accord of the governments of the Member States after consulting a panel responsible for giving an opinion on prospective candidates' suitability to perform the required duties;

26. Notes that, in her decision of 9 September 2024 on the strategic initiative on sponsorship of the presidency of the Council, the Ombudsman encouraged the Council to take stock of how the non-binding rules adopted by the Council for the use of sponsorship by its presidency ('the Guidance') have been implemented and to explore other possible measures that could help mitigate the risks associated with the use of sponsorship, which include the risk of conflicts of interest, as well as reputational risks; notes with concern from the annual report of the Ombudsman for 2024 that the Council has still not fully addressed public concerns around the use of corporate sponsorship, as there is a recurrent 'lack of transparency around the identity of sponsors, the nature of their support, and what they gain in return' and sponsors were still able to use the presidency logo for commercial purposes; calls on the Council to render the Guidance binding; reiterates its call on the Council to provide a budget for the Council Presidencies to ensure adequate and uniform standards of efficiency and effectiveness in the work in the Council in general;
27. Calls on the rotating Council Presidencies to stop using corporate sponsorship to contribute to covering their expenses as this entails a risk of creating conflicts of interest, in line with the conclusions of the workshop held by Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control on 27 June 2023;
28. Takes note of the European Council's growing involvement in legislative files, and such role requires oversight and enhanced cooperation with the budgetary authority in the frame of the discharge procedure; calls on the Council to ensure that its actions are carried out with transparency and accountability, in line with the standards applicable to other Union institutions, to maintain citizens' trust;
29. Deeply regrets the Hungarian government's misuse of its role in the 2024 rotating Presidency of the Council by engaging in high-level international meetings that undermined the Union's core values and agreed common positions; calls on the Council to firmly condemn any conduct by a Member State holding the Presidency that is not in conformity with Union values, and to take all necessary measures to ensure that future Presidencies discharge their functions in full compliance with Union principles, thereby safeguarding the integrity and credibility of the Union;
30. Stresses that while unanimity voting remains a core principle of the Treaties, its application can, in certain circumstances and in critical policy areas, affect the timelines and effectiveness of the Union, including by paralysing the Union's decision-making process and therefore making it prone to blackmail by Member States, especially those who fail to respect the rule of law; reiterates in this sense its regret regarding the Hungarian government's obstructive stance within the European Council; notes that ongoing political deadlocks continue to undermine trust and the European Council's effectiveness; calls for targeted treaty reforms or, alternatively, practical improvements, within the existing Treaty framework, to strengthen transparency, democratic decision making, accountability and the efficiency of the European Council's work; reiterates in this context its call for the Council of Ministers to move from unanimity to qualified majority voting for decisions in areas of strategic interest to the Union; notes further that the unanimity requirement has been a significant impediment to effectively responding to Russia's action, in particular on the imposition of sanctions which are subject to renewal every three months, thereby risking the weakening of the Union's capacity to act decisively and transparently and undermining citizens' trust and the Union's credibility as a geopolitical actor; calls on the Council to shift to qualified majority voting in critical areas, notably sanction regimes, in order for the Union to be able to act effectively in the face of global challenges;

Budgetary and financial management

31. Recalls that, pursuant to Article 15 of the Treaty on European Union, the European Council plays a central strategic role in providing the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and in defining its general political directions and priorities, while not exercising legislative functions; emphasises the unique added value of the European Council as a forum for high-level political coordination among Member States;
32. Regrets once again 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, not least concerning the European Council, given that it is currently impossible to get reliable information about its costs; calls that this separation include distinct budget lines for meeting-related expenditure, travel, communication and representation costs, so that the discharge authority can distinguish between European Council and Council activities and assess trends over time;

33. Notes that the budget for the Council was EUR 676 881 123 in 2024, representing an increase of 4,47 % compared to 2023; notes that this increase is mainly related to the revision of salary update parameters due to inflation;
34. Notes that the Council's implementation rate of current year commitment appropriations was 96,40 % in 2024 (compared to 97,01 % in 2023) and the implementation rate of the current year payments appropriations was 87,95 % in 2024 (compared to 86,39 % in 2023); notes that approximately EUR 24 million in appropriations were cancelled at the end of 2024 out of which approximately 62 % originated from budget lines linked to staff-related expenditure; notes that the implementation rate of the total amount carried over from 2023 to 2024, i.e. EUR 85 520 696, was 91 %;
35. Notes that appropriations carried over from 2024 to 2025 totalled EUR 78,6 million (down from approximately EUR 85,5 million the previous year) covering mainly computer systems, cost of interpretation provided in 2024 for which invoices have not been yet agreed with the Commission services at the time of the closure, buildings, information and public events, technical equipment, for safety and security, meetings and conferences mostly relating to invoices not yet received for organising European Council, Council meetings and summits in 2024, furniture and other staff expenditure;
36. Notes that the Council carried out 42 budgetary transfers in 2024 in accordance with Article 29 of the Financial Regulation, in order to reinforce various budget lines including 'Fitting-out and installation work', 'Work to make premises secure', 'Acquisition of equipment and software' and 'Purchase and replacement of technical equipment and installation'; notes that three of those transfers, which required informing the budgetary authority in accordance with Article 29(2) of the Financial Regulation, totalled approximately EUR 12,8 million;
37. Notes that the average time for payments of invoices increased from 13 to 15 days from 2023 to 2025, well below the maximum time limit of 30 days, thus avoiding interest on late payments;
38. Notes that mission expenses, comprising both mission expenses from the Secretariat and mission expenses of members of staff related to the European Council, decreased by 18,50 % from approximately 5,2 million in 2023 to approximately EUR 4,3 million in 2024, while travel expenses of delegations incurred by Presidencies and national delegations decreased by 2,61 % from approximately 15,3 million in 2023 to approximately EUR 14,9 million in 2024;
39. Calls on the Council to publish an annual breakdown of travel and representation expenses of senior officials, including the President of the European Council, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the Secretariat, in a user-friendly format accessible to the public;
40. Expresses concern over insufficient control mechanisms regarding the Council's use of consultancy services and external contractors; calls for full disclosure of all contracts exceeding EUR 50 000, detailing the scope, deliverables, and awarded entities, to prevent potential misuse of public funds;

Internal management, performance and internal control

41. Expresses concern over limited transparency on the Council's use of consultancy services and external contractors; calls for proactive publication of all high-value contracts and framework contracts, including contract modifications, deliverables and performance indicators; urges risk-based transparency with particular scrutiny of contracts linked to IT, communications and reputational services, and calls for annual reporting on reliance on external contractors versus internal capacity;
42. Notes that the Secretariat's activities were guided by the multiannual goals adopted in 2022 and a set of specific objectives that ensure ongoing decision-making in the Council and is reviewed on an annual basis; notes the Secretariat's priorities in 2024 which includes optimising the working environment, fostering a client-oriented culture, leading the green transformation, reaping the benefits of digital transformation and increasing overall organisational efficiency; appreciates that the Secretariat supported the organisation of six European Councils, two informal meetings of Heads of State or Government and one Euro Summit in 2024;

43. Welcomes the use of data in decision making, notably based on the monthly financial dashboard, showing key performance indicators across the Secretariat services and the managers dashboard with key insights from HR data in order to facilitate daily management and decisions in the area of HR;
44. Notes that in 2024 the Secretariat helped organise 4 164 meetings for the Council (down from 4 429 meetings in 2023) and 152 meetings/visits/missions for the President of the European Council (up from 124 in 2023);
45. Welcomes the implementation and functioning of the Secretariat's internal control which is based on internationally accepted standards and designed to ensure the effectiveness, efficiency and economy of operations, reliability of reporting, safeguarding of assets and information, prevention and detection of irregularities, and adequate risk management; notes that segregation of duties in financial processes was maintained, that risk registers were periodically monitored and that automated controls and financial training for members of staff contributed to a robust control environment in 2024;
46. Notes that the Council transmitted its annual report on internal audits carried out in 2024 to the discharge authority, in accordance with Article 118 of the Financial Regulation; notes that, at the end of 2024, 82 % of the recommendations issued during the years 2022-2024 had been implemented, 17 % were still open and for 1 %, risk had been accepted by management or the recommendations were no longer applicable; notes that four internal audits were finalised in 2024; notes that, for two of those audits (one on support to the European Peace Facility and the other on the accounting processes regarding the Secretariat's intangible assets), the internal auditor issued several high priority recommendations which have been accepted by the audited services; requests that the Council provide the discharge authority with a public summary of the high-priority recommendations and a clear implementation timeline, notably where audits concern support to the European Peace Facility and the management of intangible assets, given the heightened public interest and reputational sensitivity of such spending;

Human resources, equality and staff well-being

47. Notes that the Secretariat employed 3 124 members of staff at the end of 2024 (up from 3 115 in 2023); notes the staff breakdown per function, whereas the Secretariat employed 2 720 permanent members of staff, 401 temporary members of staff, 222 contractual agents and 26 seconded national experts in 2024; notes that the repartition of permanent and temporary members of staff between job categories remained stable with 1 497 administrators (AD), 1 146 assistants (AST) and 232 secretaries (SC) in 2024, as compared to respectively 1 474 AD, 1 159 AST and 295 SC in 2023; notes that the occupation rate of the establishment plan was 97,4 % at the end of 2024 (up from 97,10 % in 2023);
48. Regrets the lack of publicly available information concerning the gender and geographical distribution of members of staff in the Secretariat; calls on the Council to provide information to Parliament on gender balance, geographical distribution and disabilities of its members of staff and on the related internal policies; encourages the Council to promote the geographical balance of its members of staff by offering a wider pool of candidates from underrepresented Member States;
49. Welcomes the Secretariat's efforts in 2024 to attract, retain and motivate members of staff; notes that the Secretariat participated in Career Days, career fairs, human resources events for Permanent Representations and information sessions for Member State representatives, reinforced exchanges with members of staff of other institutions through an inter-institutional job-shadowing exercise with the active participation of 23 Secretariat staff, contributed to the modernisation of EPSO's operations, organised 518 selection procedures and 127 interviews, as well as internal competitions for all types of roles;
50. Notes with satisfaction that the Secretariat offers a range of training sessions and awareness-raising campaigns on specific subjects such as finance, security measure and etiquette, among other; notes in particular improved metrics with regard to the Secretariat's ethics awareness campaign, whereas staff engagement on ethical questions was significantly boosted in 2024;

51. Notes a variety of measures taken by the Council in favour of its members of staff's health and wellbeing in 2024; notes in this context that the Secretariat offered support through, inter alia, occupational and clinical psychologists and training courses for mental health preservation and stress management; welcomes the Secretariat's involvement in the organisation of the Interinstitutional Health and Safety week in October 2024 and the publication on its intranet of all services and activities in place at the Secretariat to support well-being and health; notes that the Secretariat developed a dashboard with indicators regarding psychosocial risks which aims to better target prevention measures and has put in place a multi-disciplinary team that is developing a health and safety management system for the Secretariat to better control any workplace risks;
52. Notes with satisfaction that the Secretariat has several groups or networks such as the Secretariat's diversity and inclusion Affinity Group and Network, the Olympia Network (for female administrators), the LGBTI Network and the Disability Network;
53. Notes with satisfaction the Secretariat's measures for persons with disabilities in the framework of its activities; notes that the Secretariat has put in place a simplified procedure for handling reasonable accommodation requests from trainees, members of staff and candidates with disabilities; notes further that follow-up training sessions for ushers on welcoming and accompanying visitors with different disabilities were organised in 2024; notes that the Secretariat welcomed 115 trainees in 2024, of which five were welcomed as part of the Secretariat's positive action programme for trainees with disabilities; recalls that traineeships should be remunerated in compliance with Parliament's resolution of 14 June 2023 on quality traineeships in the Union (2020/2005(INL)), which calls for all internships in the Union to be paid; emphasizes that unpaid traineeships constitute a form of exploitation of young workers and a barrier to equal opportunities;
54. Notes that the Secretariat implemented new rules on working time, teleworking and leave along with the launch of a new IT module (Sysper-TIM) for the management of working time; notes with satisfaction the organisation of training sessions and communication activities such as video tutorials, FAQs, webinars etc. on the new rules and the new module;

Ethical framework and transparency

55. Reiterates that ethical conduct contributes to sound financial management and increases public trust and that, as stressed by the Court in its Special Report 13/2019, there is scope for improvement in the ethical frameworks of the Union institutions; recalls, in particular, the recommendation issued by the Court with regard to improving the Council's ethical framework; expresses concern about the lack of a common Union ethical framework governing the work of the representatives of Member States in the Council as identified by the Court; stresses that no Union institution should be exempt from clear, binding and enforceable ethical rules when participating in Union decision-making that involve public expenditure;
56. Regrets that two key components of the ethical framework of the Council, the 'Guide to Ethics and Conduct' for Secretariat staff and the 'Code of Conduct for the President of the European Council', are available on the Council's website without further guidance or date of publication; criticises that, despite several requests by Parliament, 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;
57. Notes that the Secretariat publishes an annual report with information regarding the occupational activities of former senior officials of the Secretariat after leaving the service in accordance with Article 16, third and fourth paragraphs, of the Staff Regulations of officials of the Union; notes that, according to the report concerning 2024, one former senior official declared their intention to engage in occupational activities more than 12 months after having left the Secretariat; notes that the Joint Committee was consulted before issuing a decision in this case; notes with regret a lack of information on the Council's website as to whether the decision taken was in favour or against granting the permission to engage in the requested activity; reiterates its call on the Council to establish a clear, proportionate and enforceable post-term employment rules for senior officials, building on the existing legal framework and to ensure appropriate transparency, including when relevant public disclosure of private-sector affiliations, in full respect of fundamental rights and proportionality principles;

58. Regrets the fact that the participation of the Member States' Permanent Representatives in the mandatory transparency register, set up by the interinstitutional agreement of 20 May 2021 between Parliament, the Council and the Commission, is completely voluntary as the application of the conditionality principle is left to the discretion of each Member State's Permanent Representation; notes that only a limited number of Member States and the Union institutions abide by the best practice of applying a mandatory broad-scope definition of lobbyist in their regulatory framework and insists that all Permanent Representations should take an active part in the mandatory transparency register before, during and after their Member State's Council presidency; recalls Parliament's position that Member State representatives who benefit directly from Union subsidies through the businesses they own should not be allowed to participate in policy or budgetary discussions and votes related to those subsidies; regrets that the Council does not fully use the mandatory transparency register or accept proposals to improve it; reiterates its call on the Council to refrain from engaging with unregistered lobbyists and to make sure that its senior officials, including Permanent Representatives and Heads of Delegation, publicly disclose their meetings with interest groups and lobbyists in a standardised transparency register, similar to the obligations imposed on Members of Parliament and the Commission;

59. Regrets that the decision-making process in the Council is still far from fully transparent, which affects citizens' trust in the Union as a transparent entity and thereby jeopardises the reputation of the Union as a whole; recalls and supports the recommendations of the Ombudsman regarding the transparency of the Council legislative process in strategic inquiry OI/2/2017/TE; urges the Council to take all measures necessary to implement the recommendations of the Ombudsman and the relevant rulings of the CJEU without undue delay; recalls that the CJEU, in its judgement in Case T-163/21, *De Capitani v Council*, underlined that clearer legislative transparency would be needed from the Council in order to ensure access to legislative documents, simply corresponding to the Council's obligation in terms of public scrutiny and accountability of the co-legislators as the basis of any democratic legitimacy;

60. Notes that the Ombudsman opened a new own-initiative inquiry in 2023 and finalised it in 2024 regarding how the Council handles public access requests for legislative documents; notes the conclusions of that inquiry which found that the Council used the protection of ongoing decision-making processes as a reason for refusing access to documents with arguments that were 'vague, abstract, and unsubstantiated'; recalls the fact that the CJEU dismissed arguments that included the need to avoid external pressure or public misinterpretation or the need to protect legal advice; is thus concerned that the Council fails to be consistent with Union case law; asks the Council to rectify these shortcomings by promptly disclosing legislative documents, even if doing so would give rise to external pressure as this is a factor in any democratic law-making process and refuse access to legislative documents only in truly exceptional circumstances; calls on the Council to implement without delay the Ombudsman's conclusions and relevant case-law by ensuring that refusals under 'protection of ongoing decision-making' are strictly justified case-by-case, reasoned in a concrete manner, and subject to robust internal review; calls for proactive publication of key legislative documents (including working party documents and negotiating positions) as the default, and for annual public reporting on refusal grounds used;

61. Notes that the Access to Documents team reported to have received and replied to a high number of requests for public access to documents in 2024, namely 2 872 initial requests for access to documents (down from 3 732) which requirement the analysis of 10 096 documents (down from 13 912 documents in 2023) and 30 confirmatory applications (down from 40 in 2023); acknowledges a decrease in this type of workload likely due to a halt in the Union's legislative work given the European elections in 2024;

62. Notes that, among the initial requests for access, full access was granted to 7 323 documents (72,5 %) and partial access to 1 181 documents (11,70 %) while access was refused to 1 592 documents (15,80 %); notes that for the confirmatory applications, full access was granted to 36 documents and partial access to 45 documents, while access was refused to 45 documents; notes that initial requests were processed on average in 17 working days and confirmatory applications in 31 working days;

63. Notes that, as part of the implementation of the SG Decision 23/2021 concerning psychological and sexual harassment at work, several actions were taken in 2024 such as compulsory training sessions on anti-harassment and inappropriate behaviour for newcomers, new managers and trainees; notes that the Secretariat has a group of anti-harassment confidential counsellors who dealt with 13 requests for confidential counselling related to potential harassment or improper behaviour in 2024;

64. Welcomes that, according to the publicly available annual reports, no cases of fraud or irregularity were brought to the attention of the responsible authorising officers by delegation during 2024, nor were such cases subject to the competence of the panel (Article 145 of the Financial Regulation) or OLAF;

Digitalisation, cybersecurity and data protection

65. Notes that, in 2024, the Secretariat continued to pursue its goal of digital transformation, in line with its Digital Strategy priorities for 2022-2025; notes, that out of 103 IT related projects in the annual work plan for 2024, 11 % were completed at the end of the year while 3 % were cancelled or merged, with the majority of projects (62 %) still ongoing;
66. Notes with satisfaction that 98 % of invoices were submitted electronically in 2024 (up from 97 % in 2023) and 49 % of the Secretariat's contracts and purchase orders were signed using electronic signature; notes further that all new procurement procedures in excess of EUR 143 000 were managed with the Commission's Public Procurement Management Tool;
67. Notes the Secretariat's major priorities with regard to inter-institutional synergies and alignment of procedures in the area of HR business processes with the help of a single service portal (HR-IT); notes that in 2024 the Secretariat signed a memorandum of understanding with the Commission for the multi-year HR transformation programme, which the Secretariat has joined in July 2024;
68. Welcomes further progress that the Secretariat made in 2024 in the area of IT and digitalisation, such as the launch of a new tool for managing medical and vaccination appointments, a new platform to manage traineeship applications, the first phase of the POMME project that improves workflow application with regard to meeting planning and interpretation scheduling, a platform (PreSY) for a comprehensive overview of monitoring activities in the Council's three buildings, a platform (e-Resto catering) for catering related activities and requests and Collab Conseil, a tool designed to store all logistical documents needed in ministerial council preparations;
69. Notes that the Secretariat tested various artificial intelligence-based tools to answer questions on Staff Regulations, build learning materials (structured content, case studies, quizzes or videos based on a specific prompt) or to assist managers in examining CVs; stresses that the use of artificial intelligence must be carried out by guaranteeing strict principles of ethical use, transparency, data protection, human oversight, and protection against algorithmic bias or misuse;
70. Notes that in 2024, the EDPS conducted an audit on the processing of medical data, in particular retention, within key European institutions, including the Secretariat; invites the Secretariat to implement EDPS's recommendations with regard to ensuring proper data retention policies;
71. Notes the Secretariat's activities, through its Digital Services structure, that aim to comply with the new Cybersecurity Regulation which entered into force at the beginning of 2024; notes in this context that in 2024 the Secretariat developed internal procedures for reporting on cybersecurity incidents, provided input for all The Cybersecurity Service for the Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies (CERT-EU) guidelines and implemented a cybersecurity compliance management service, whereas 11 compliance reports were completed in that year; welcomes the Secretariat's efforts to complete the initial cybersecurity review of all the Secretariat's digital networks and information systems; commends the Council for its involvement in the preparation of the European Cybersecurity Month 2024 focusing on social engineering;

Buildings

72. Notes that key projects were executed in 2024 such as the renovation of Council's meeting rooms, including new furniture, office corridors and the Justus Lipsius accreditation desk;
73. Notes that the Secretariat launched preparatory activities for the renovation of its buildings, including Justus Lipsius and the main administrative building; is informed of the expressed need to completely overhaul those buildings, to ensure efficient operations and full compliance with the Union's regulatory framework with regard to environmental performance;

74. Notes that the budget line 2 0 1 1 for 'Water, gas, electricity and heating' was reinforced by 33 % through a budgetary transfer in 2024; notes that the Secretariat continued to reduce its energy consumption, such as by reducing the building heating and by replacing the boilers in the Justus Lipsius building;
75. Notes that key projects were executed in 2024 such as the renovation of some meeting rooms in the LEX and Justus Lipsius buildings, the continuous renovation of office corridors in the Justus Lipsius building, improvements of facilities/infrastructures for bikes in GSC premises and modernisation of the Justus Lipsius reception desks;
76. Regrets that the Council has still not implemented a simplified accreditation procedure to facilitate the access of the other Union institutions' members of staff to Council's premises; calls on the Council to swiftly adopt and apply such a procedure without further delay, in the spirit of interinstitutional cooperation;

Environment and sustainability

77. Notes that, further to an external audit performed in 2024, the certification of the Secretariat under the EcoManagement and Audit Scheme (EMAS) was maintained;
78. Notes that the Secretariat achieved energy savings in 2024 by improving the energy performance of its technical infrastructures such as the lighting systems in the buildings it occupies; notes a reduction in the Secretariat's energy consumption by 24,40 % between 2018 and 2024 and a decrease of water consumption by 17 % between 2023 and 2024; welcomes the Secretariat's initiatives to further reduce paper consumption;
79. Welcomes the Secretariat's sustainable practices embedded in some of its operations; notes, inter alia, that several procurement procedures and framework contracts include criteria on reducing waste and recycling of equipment, the Green Office is consulted on high-value procurement projects at the Secretariat and its restaurants earned the Good Food certification in 2024; welcomes the fact that the Secretariat revised the guide to members of staff's missions in 2024, which entered into force in 2025 and covers new incentives to reduce the carbon footprint from travel by members of staff; notes with satisfaction an increase with regard to members of staff who came to work using sustainable means like public transport or bike, from 67 % in 2023 to 78 % of in 2024;
80. Welcomes the fact that the Secretariat developed an environmental strategy that defines a path from 2025 to 2030 for improving the Secretariat's environmental performance and implemented communication actions to increase awareness of members of staff, delegates and visitors on environment related actions that can be taken;
81. Notes that the Secretariat purchased more sustainable transport vehicles, i.e. one electric berline and three hybrid minivans; notes further that infrastructure and facilities for bikes in front of Justus Lipsius buildings have been improved;

Interinstitutional cooperation

82. Stresses the need for Article 319 TFEU to be revised in order to explicitly stipulate that Parliament, besides granting discharge to the Commission, also grants discharge to other Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies in respect of the implementation of their sections of the budget or of their budgets, aiming to ensure legal clarity, consistency and equal treatment among Union institutions; invites the Council to take concrete steps in due time to overcome the inter-institutional conflict and resume talks with Parliament in order to reach a common agreement for a smooth and Treaty-compliant resumption of the discharge procedure;
83. Calls on the Council to resume negotiations at the highest level to resolve the long-standing discharge impasse; requests the Commission and the Council Legal Service to provide a legal opinion on potential Treaty-based solutions to enforce Council accountability in the discharge procedure;

Communication

84. Notes that, in 2024, the overall budget for communication, taking into account transfers implemented in the course of the year, was EUR 12 518 610, i.e. 5,45 % higher than the 2023 budget;
 85. Notes that, in 2024, the Secretariat provided communication services to the President of the European Council, the President of the Eurogroup, the rotating presidencies (Belgium and Hungary), the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Member States and the Secretariat; notes that, in 2024, the Secretariat ensured continuous media relations, social media and web presence support throughout the transition of officeholders, organised audiovisual coverage and streaming of key international engagements, and maintained high-quality operational support including live event broadcasting, press services and branding for institutional summits and meetings;
 86. Notes that, according to an online survey conducted in the last quarter of 2024, 68,30 % of users (up from 67 % in 2023) were satisfied with their overall experience with the Council's website, which had over 26 million visits in 2024 (+ 7 % compared to 2023), and 71 400 subscribers, compared to 57 900 in 2023;
 87. Notes that the Directorate-General for Communication delivered extensive press and media engagement activities throughout 2024, including 76 press briefings, 771 press releases, 84 press conferences and comprehensive support for media accreditation and coverage; notes further that the Council's press centre and website were used widely, with the press section of the Council website attracting over 6,4 million visits and nearly 2 million visits to meetings pages, demonstrating sustained public and media interest in Council decision-making;
 88. Notes that, in 2024, the Secretariat's digital teams, in close cooperation with the presidencies, monitored and enhanced the Belgian and Hungarian presidency websites, registering around 407 000 visits and 1,2 million page views combined, and delivered continued improvements to the main Council website with 19 sets of user-driven enhancements; further notes the implementation of machine translation features and accessibility upgrades, alongside extensive user research to improve clarity and navigability of online content across all official Union languages, thereby reinforcing the Council's digital reach and engagement with stakeholders and citizens.
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