

COVID-19 response of EU public administration

Abstract

In order to provide the Members of the Budgetary Control Committee with reliable information and data on the COVID-19 response of the EU public administration, [the study](#) analyses the EU institutions' response, their business continuity measures and their impact on the budget from 2020 onwards and staff of the respective institution. Furthermore, the study provides an overview of practices and challenges around the new working modalities EU institutions are adopting for the post-pandemic future, as well as recommendations for the way forward.

The extensive analysis and consultations conducted for this study have helped define impacts of COVID-19 on EU public administration, the measures taken and their consequences, as outlined below. The analysis covers seven European institutions: the European Parliament (EP), the European Commission (EC), the European Court of Justice (CJEU), the European Court of Auditors (ECA), the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). Moreover, the analysis does not cover decentralised agencies and EU delegations but only the headquarters of the EEAS.

The pandemic deeply impacted the functioning of EU institutions in terms of daily administrative routine and institutional decision-making. The pandemic also led to changes in voting and other procedures as well as new formal and informal inter-institutional dialogue.

The study shows that EU institutions reacted quickly. By adopting multiple solutions, they promptly switched to teleworking and exploited technological possibilities to overcome the initial difficulties. All EU institutions improved support for the physical and mental health of staff, empowering existing medical and social internal services and investing in the safety of their infrastructure. All this ensured they could face the emergency in the short term.

In the medium to long-term with changes spurred by the COVID-19 crisis stabilising, new challenges will arise or are already here. These concern hybrid working, IT threats, new approaches to workspace, etc. Most importantly, the paradigm shift in working modalities due to the pandemic must be accompanied by significant changes in mindset, skills and attitudes to fully embrace the 'new normal'.

Below, more details are offered on each of the research topics.

Challenges

During the crisis



Challenges were either common, i.e., found across the EU institutions, or specific to individual institutions due to their role.

The common challenges include:

- difficulties in holding internal meetings,
- managing office routines,
- internal and external coordination,
- managing internal working space,
- organising and going on missions.

The challenges specific to individual institutions are linked to audit visits (ECA), meetings among members and with other institutions (EP, CoR, EESC), the decision-making process (EP, EC), repatriation of EU staff and their families (EEAS) and problems holding hearings (CJEU).

Business continuity



Business continuity plan effectiveness

Most institutions found their business continuity plans (BCPs) were effective and key to ensuring business continuity.

Both CoR and EESC, as well as the ECA, agree that BCPs need to be re-designed to be more agile and provide quicker responses as well as immediate actions with clearer decision-making procedures and 'lines of command' in case of emergency, as well as more efficient internal communication. Furthermore, the updated plans need to include a wider range of crisis scenarios.

Recommendations

Short term (2022-2023): An internal reflection in each EU institution should draw lessons and build institutional memory of how BCPs should function.

Medium/long-term (after 2024): BCPs should be regularly updated and upgraded with broad involvement of both hierarchy and administrative personnel to 1) better define responsibilities and chains of command in a crisis, 2) improve internal communication, 3) check redundancy and resilience of administrative routines and IT framework, and 4) empower internal medical and psychological services.

Teleworking and new working methods

EU staff started compulsory teleworking on 16 March 2020, with the exception of services which had to be on office premises, e.g. security and logistics.

There was already some flexibility in most institutions, but the existing schemes had to be extended, including conditions for maternal and parental leave. The schemes facilitated the sudden shift to full teleworking, efficiently and promptly.

The gradual return to office in spring 2020 included different options for the number of days and hours to be spent on institutional premises.

Working modalities and procedures also changed significantly with remote working and the inability to access premises. For instance, distance checks have replaced on-the-spot checks for ECA auditors and online voting procedures were introduced in the EP, CoR and EESC.

In general, the shift to teleworking has been quicker and smoother for institutions with existing flexible locations and hours.

Hybrid working will continue to be a reality for EU staff, also to stay competitive in the job market. The fast shift to hybrid working implies not only preparedness in

terms of equipment but also an important shift in mindset and the ability to fully adapt to the new working modalities. New skills for managing people working fully or partially outside the office have already been integrated, the past two years having been 'training'.

There are new structures to prepare for and design the 'new world of working' in EU institutions, although little detailed information on these is so far available.

The costs of teleworking are perceived differently by the institutions. For many, the additional costs and investments, especially for new IT equipment and software licenses, largely took place in 2020.

Recommendations

Short term (2022-2023): In the first phase, special attention should be given to a necessary change in mindset, skills and attitudes, especially at managerial level, to manage staff in a hybrid environment. Despite differences, sharing experiences among EU institutions can be very productive. A common blueprint for heads of unit/managers could help capitalise on experiences as well as disseminate good practices across EU institutions.

Medium/long-term (after 2024): innovative tools should be developed to overcome those issues, with some degree of experimentation encouraged. Regular exchanges among HR departments in different institutions should also involve sharing 'best practices' and jointly testing new working solutions. An open inter-institutional structure can be set up to promote experimentation and collection of best practices. In identifying and testing new working solutions, staff representatives, and staff in general, shall be involved both to have a quick 'reality check' on the level of acceptance and to acquire new ideas.

Building management

Measures were introduced in all the institutions to mitigate the risk of infection. These include separate entrances and exits, plexiglass screens and thermal sensors.

The pandemic boosted a general re-thinking of the workspace in the EU institutions based on the so called 3Bs: 'behaviour, bricks and bytes'.

There is general consensus that workspaces are or will be redesigned to adapt to the new working modalities. In particular, permanent workstations will often be replaced by flexible ones. How these should be organised is still under debate, but a frequent objective is to have open collaborative spaces (e.g. in the EC). At the same time, there is some reluctance by staff to leave fixed offices for 'hot desking'.

Recommendations

Short term (2022-2023): Shifting from traditional individual offices to open space entails not only changing the physical space but also the working modalities. If not harmonised, both together might have unintended effects. A careful assessment of the new layout should be made to understand such impacts, and any remedies promptly adopted. At least in this first phase, a constant monitoring of the new adopted solutions should allow an ongoing adjustment and optimisation.

Medium/long-term (after 2024): There is general satisfaction with inter-institutional cooperation and coordination during the pandemic. This calls for a reflection on a possible enhanced cooperation beyond the crisis. Building and workspace policy can offer opportunities to see more synergies and coordination among institutions regarding office space management, bearing in mind the complexity and specific features and needs of each institution.

Staff recruitment

In response to the challenges of remote working and travel restrictions, EU institutions had to adapt their procedures to ensure continued recruitment. The whole process (from interviews to entry into service) shifted to digital with online selection procedures and paperless workflows.

The recruitment process did not change substantially after the peak of the pandemic. In the future, final recruitment interviews and decisions will again take place at institutional premises rather than online. There is, however, a sharp shift to digital and paperless for the application phase and internal HR management of the selection process.

Recommendations

The pandemic revealed the need to have new high-skilled staff in the EU institutions with competences and capacities which are already highly required in the market (e.g. cybersecurity). However, EU institutions could find it difficult to attract and keep such talent. Hybrid working modalities can partially make working for EU institutions more attractive. However, a more complex reflection is needed to see if the current competitions and long-term job contracts are the most effective way to attract the necessary competence and expertise.

IT tools and infrastructure

The pandemic has been a catalyst for digital transformation, pushing all the institutions to take measures to ensure the organisations function at both political and administrative levels. Consistent with these challenges, there were three main types of response:

- Provision of ICT equipment for all staff;
- Shift of internal procedures to digital (procurement, recruitment, etc.); and
- Transformation of some institutional activities to remote (training, auditing, judicial activities).

The shift to digital had already been planned pre-pandemic but was not expected to occur so quickly. It is now important to identify the gaps and strategically plan what still needs to be digitalised.

IT has proved to be a highly integrated sector among institutions. There were greater efficiencies thanks to coordination at strategic level.

Cybersecurity will be a key challenge in the future, as cybersecurity threats are directly linked to advances in technology, especially for hybrid working. User awareness programmes are being implemented and updated.

In terms of budget, additional investments are still needed though to a lesser extent, as most investments were already made in 2020.

Recommendation

The strategic priority of IT investments remains important to keep EU institutions both safe and resilient to crises. Beyond the crisis, the digitalisation process makes cybersecurity crucial. Investment in IT should be sufficient to guarantee full preparedness in times of crisis and beyond, taking also in consideration the need to hire high-skilled personnel (see above recommendation on staff recruitment).

Inter-institutional cooperation



Cooperation and synergies

Inter-institutional cooperation took various forms from March 2020 to achieve different objectives. The documentation highlights:

- Regular meetings to exchange information on the evolving health crisis and to coordinate measures (e.g. to ensure business continuity);
- Service meetings for coordination on specific matters; and
- Joint operational measures e.g. new IT systems and procedures.

Inter-institutional cooperation and coordination during the crisis was largely considered effective. The inter-institutional Medical Board has been praised as key to ensuring coordination between institutions on medical aspects of the crisis. Coordination between the CoR and EESC was particularly integrated due to their sharing services and premises. Cooperation between IT services was also considered successful as it had solid roots already before the crisis.

Recommendation

The general satisfaction with inter-institutional cooperation and coordination during the pandemic calls for a reflection on possible enhanced cooperation beyond the crisis in different fields such as building policy, HR management, joint public procurement. Indeed, joint efforts to overcome the pandemic crisis enhanced the cooperative attitude among EU institutions. In this perspective, tapping on the empowered cooperation can be a valuable opportunity.

Public procurement



Goods and services purchased

EU institutions opened many negotiating procedures to purchase goods and services during the pandemic. Most of these were organised in compliance with standard EU rules but some required maximum flexibility without prior notification of the contract notice on the basis of urgency, as foreseen by the Financial Regulation.

This flexibility was required in particular for medical equipment, IT services/devices and studies.

Simplification and innovation

Procurement procedures had to be organised urgently, requiring institutions to increase their capacity to launch calls for tender, deliver documents and provide public procurement advice. This was possible thanks to simplified procedures in place prior to the pandemic, which were accelerated or extended to other areas.

The challenge now is to reinforce and expand the use of eTendering, eSubmission and digital signatures to other areas of administration and procurement, post-crisis.

Recommendation

In light of the successful implementation of joint procurement procedures during the crisis, the continuation of cooperation in this area should be envisaged, as well as the use of more flexible and simplified procedures where possible and in line with the Financial Regulation.

Staff productivity and satisfaction



Productivity and performance

Institutions report a positive experience of teleworking for most staff with no significant influence on productivity. Challenges to performance and productivity include decreased cooperation and teamwork, IT problems and an increased workload.

For managers, the fast transition to teleworking often required extra effort to manage teams, particularly when confronted by the need to evaluate staff performance differently than in the past. Performance evaluation is evolving, as are managerial skills and mindsets in general.

Training remains important for staff to acquire new skills. The online format proved successful during the height of the pandemic and reached a wider audience but should not entirely replace in-person training, which is more effective for certain subjects.

There are new ways of learning to be integrated, with knowledge being transferred in a more fluid manner rather than in restricted timeframes and formats.

Workload and work-life balance

Staff surveys in many EU institutions highlight a positive perception of teleworking for workload and work-life balance.

Increased workload and negative effects on work-life balance were especially relevant during full lockdowns in 2020. Some staff reported an inability to separate professional and private lives when working from home, and some noted the negative impact of less social and professional contacts with colleagues. HR and managers gave increased attention to work-life balance, including the right to disconnect.

Generally staff are very positive about the impact of teleworking on work-life balance with the current hybrid working modalities.

Team empowerment

The adoption of teleworking by staff in EU institutions had an impact on team empowerment. Several institutions mentioned an inability to organise team building activities and away days as having a potential negative influence on staff cohesion in the longer term. Managers reported difficulties in keeping staff motivated during teleworking.

The new hybrid modalities do not *per se* reduce the sense of belonging or the ability to work in teams and co-create, but they could amplify these risks.

Recommendations

A shift in performance evaluation in a hybrid working environment is needed. Emphasis should increasingly be put on trust-based and result-oriented assessments rather than on 'time inputs'.

Particular attention should also be given to training which takes into account new ways of learning.

Increased attention should continue to be given to work-life balance and the right to disconnect. New ideas and modus operandi should be developed to ensure team cohesion and empowerment in a hybrid work setting. More specifically, managers shall be trained for a new form of leadership capable of motivating staff in a hybrid context.

Staff health



Measures to support staff health

Support for mental health along with medical support became a priority in most institutions. This was delivered through tailor-made services, including helplines, support groups, as well as webinars on wellbeing and mindfulness. Information was also provided to staff on coping with teleworking and work-life balance to avoid burnouts.

Several institutions hired additional staff to deal with the health crisis, including doctors, nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists. Some institutions (EC, EEAS, ECA) used 'pulse' surveys to regularly check staff wellbeing during the crisis.

For some institutions existing mental health and wellbeing programmes helped significantly (e.g. EP).

Health protocols

The key measures introduced by the new COVID-19 protocols are:

- Temperature screening at entrances;
- Compulsory mask wearing;
- Social distancing (minimum 1.5 metres);
- Compliance with hand hygiene (hand sanitisers in buildings);
- Enhanced cleaning (e.g. disinfection of common areas);
- Protection screens;
- Modification of ventilation and air-conditioning systems where needed; and
- Awareness raising (e.g. signs, e-mails).

The establishment of a fully digital tracing system for EC staff, which is still in use, should be mentioned. This has proven a great example of how IT can support the needs of individuals.

Recommendations

Continued medical and psychological support to staff should be ensured beyond the crisis. Also, the new hybrid working modalities entail the need to empower health and social services.

Impact on budget **Budget variation**

COVID-19 impacted the absorption capacity of the analysed EU institutions. In the majority of cases, the 2020 ratio of appropriations (total planned budget) on financial commitments was lower than in 2019 (96% 2020 vs. 99% in 2019). The EU institutions with lower budgets absorption (EP, CoR, EESC) are more exposed to COVID-19 impacts as their budget usually goes to organising large meetings.

Costs avoided and savings

As with the budget variation, the three organisations with more savings are the EP, the CoR and the EESC. The costs avoided due to the pandemic relate to travel, meeting organisation and building maintenance (especially less heating).

Additional costs

The pandemic meant EU institutions had more costs, mainly related to IT investments to support teleworking and teleconferencing. However, COVID-19 also accelerated digitalisation, so the investments also de-materialise administrative workflows and expand the use of web technology to enhance communication and transparency with EU citizens.

Long-term budgetary impact

The pandemic will mainly affect the distribution rather than the amount of budget allocated. Expenditure will be steered by the new working modalities and priorities, e.g., from traditional to online meetings, from physical to digital facilities, etc.

Recommendations

An overall cost-benefit analysis of the different options (in terms of e.g. building space, working modalities, IT solutions) might be implemented to provide a more precise overview of the long-term budgetary impact.

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