



Plenary sitting

A9-0074/2023

24.3.2023

REPORT

on discharge in respect of the implementation of the general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2021, Section VI – European Economic and Social Committee
(2022/2086(DEC))

Committee on Budgetary Control

Rapporteur: Mikuláš Peksa

CONTENTS

	Page
1. PROPOSAL FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT DECISION.....	3
2. MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION.....	5
INFORMATION ON ADOPTION IN COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE.....	20
INFORMATION ON ADOPTION IN COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE.....	21
FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE	22

1. PROPOSAL FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT DECISION

**on discharge in respect of the implementation of the general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2021, Section VI – European Economic and Social Committee
(2022/2086(DEC))**

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2021¹,
 - having regard to the consolidated annual accounts of the European Union for the financial year 2021 (COM(2022)0323 – C9-0232/2022)²,
 - having regard to the European Economic and Social Committee’s annual report to the discharge authority on internal audits carried out in 2021,
 - having regard to the Court of Auditors’ annual report on the implementation of the budget concerning the financial year 2021, together with the institutions’ replies³,
 - having regard to the statement of assurance⁴ as to the reliability of the accounts and the legality and regularity of the underlying transactions provided by the Court of Auditors for the financial year 2021, pursuant to Article 287 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,
 - having regard to Article 314(10) and Articles 317, 318 and 319 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,
 - having regard to Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 July 2018 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union, amending Regulations (EU) No 1296/2013, (EU) No 1301/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1304/2013, (EU) No 1309/2013, (EU) No 1316/2013, (EU) No 223/2014, (EU) No 283/2014, and Decision No 541/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 966/2012⁵, and in particular Articles 59, 118, 260, 261 and 262 thereof,
 - having regard to Rule 100 of and Annex V to its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A9-0074/2023),
1. Grants the Secretary-General of the European Economic and Social Committee discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Economic and

¹ OJ L 93, 17.3.2021.

² OJ C 399, 17.10.2022, p. 1.

³ OJ C 391, 12.10.2022, p. 6.

⁴ OJ C 399, 17.10.2022, p. 240.

⁵ OJ L 193, 30.7.2018, p. 1.

Social Committee for the financial year 2021;

2. Sets out its observations in the resolution below;
3. Instructs its President to forward this decision and the resolution forming an integral part of it to the European Economic and Social Committee, the Council, the Commission and the Court of Auditors, and to arrange for their publication in the *Official Journal of the European Union* (L series).

2. MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

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 2021, Section VI – European Economic and Social Committee (2022/2086(DEC))

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 2021, Section VI – European Economic and Social Committee,
 - having regard to Rule 100 of and Annex V to its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A9-0074/2023),
- A. whereas the European Economic and Social Committee (the ‘Committee’) is an advisory body of the Union providing a forum for consultation, dialogue and consensus among representatives of the various economic, social and civil components of organised civil society from the Member States;
- B. whereas the Committee contributes to the Union decision-making process and, by ensuring links between Union policies and economic, social and civic circumstances, it pursues its missions of better law making, participatory democracy from the bottom up and promotion of the European values;
- C. whereas the consultation of the Committee by the Commission or the Council is mandatory in certain cases; whereas the Committee may also adopt opinions on its own initiative while enjoying a wide area for referral as defined by the Single European Act, the Maastricht Treaty and the Amsterdam Treaty, allowing it to be consulted by Parliament;
- D. whereas the Committee’s commission for financial and budgetary affairs (CAF) is the Committee’s supervisory body for all budgetary procedures and, in particular, the establishment of the budget estimates, the budget implementation, the annual activity report, the discharge and the follow up to the annual report of the Court of Auditors (the ‘Court’);
- E. 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 an efficient financial and administrative management, performance-based budgeting and good governance of human resources;
1. Notes that the budget of the Committee falls under MFF heading 7, ‘European public administration’, which amounted to a total of EUR 10,7 billion in 2021 (representing 5,9 % of Union spending); observes that the budget of the Committee represented 1,2 % of the total Union spending on administration;

2. Notes that the Court in its Annual Report for the financial year 2021 increased its sample of transactions under 'Administration' from 48 in 2020 to 60 in 2021;
3. Notes that the Court mentions that the work carried out over many years indicates that MFF heading 7 concerns overall low-risk spending; notes, however, that the annual report on the implementation of the budget for the 2021 financial year does not provide any relevant information on the Committee and invites the Court to include in its next annual reports comprehensive data regarding the completion of all requirements necessary for a consistent discharge procedure.
4. Notes with satisfaction that in the annual Report for the financial year 2021, the Court did not identify any specific issues concerning the Committee;

Budgetary and financial management

5. Notes that the final budget of the Committee for 2021 was EUR 145 024 938, representing a slight increase of 1,7 % compared to EUR 142 539 393 in 2020 and EUR 138 502 768 in 2019; notes that the most important budget lines in 2021, making up about 80 % of the overall budget, were those for remuneration and allowances, followed by members' travel and subsistence allowance, lease payments, interpreters and fitting-out of premises;
6. Observes with concern the low budget implementation of 90,8 %, compared to 91,8 % in 2020 and far from the pre-pandemic levels in 2019 and 2018 respectively of 98,1 % and 98,7 %); notes that the uncommitted appropriations returned to the Union budget are the highest in the last four years and amount to EUR 13 336 920, compared to EUR 11 677 200 and EUR 2 579 332 respectively in 2020 and in 2019 and EUR 1 819 462 in 2018; notes that this decrease is considered by the Committee to be a direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic; observes, however, that in the economic outturn account, the overall expenses slightly increased in 2021, by 5 % compared to 2020, which the Committee explains was due to an increase in activity compared to the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic; points out that the two indicators appear to be pointing in opposite directions;
7. Underlines the low payment rate at 31 December 2021 of 78 %, a decrease from 83,2 % and 92,5 % respectively in 2020 and 2019; appreciates that the average payment time in 2021 decreased to 19,94 days which is an improvement compared to 2020 (28,44 days) and 2019 (30,12 days); observes, however, that electronic invoices as a share of all invoices only reached 68 % in 2021, compared to 67 % in 2020 and still lower than 79 % in 2019;
8. Remarks that an unprecedented surplus of EUR 13 163 207 was carried over from 2021 to 2022, much higher than in 2020 and 2019 when respectively EUR 8 722 448 and EUR 8 614 946 were carried over;
9. Notes that, in 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the activities of the Committee, so that for certain lines there was a reduction in the use of appropriations (members' travel costs and allowances, interpretations, staff missions and organisation of events and hearings including the catering related to those events) while for others the health crisis required additional expenditure (technical support for remote or hybrid meetings, including simultaneous interpretation, reinforcement of IT facilities to cope

with increased teleworking and additional equipment needed by the Committee's medical service); observes that the leftover appropriations were used to address the backlog in IT and buildings, acknowledged in previous discharge exercises;

10. Remarks that the amount of transfer in 2021 was EUR 5 323 400, meaning that the transfer in 2021 and that in 2020 of EUR 10 378 352 were between 2,5 and 5 times higher than the transfers in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (EUR 3 119 041 and EUR 1 981 731 in 2019 and 2018 respectively); remarks that transfers were initiated earlier in the year but, despite the efforts made, not all leftovers could be absorbed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
11. Observes that, in 2021, the Committee continued its activities to improve the cost-effectiveness of its administrative circuits, achieving full paperless financial workflows and using qualified electronic signatures for contracts and amendments; notes that savings have been achieved mainly through the synergies resulting from the cooperation agreement between the Committee and the European Committee of the Regions (the 'CoR'), renewed in 2021, notably in the areas of infrastructure (the overall estimated savings made on rent, maintenance, consumables and staff amount to over EUR 12 million), IT, security and meeting services;
12. Is aware that tender procedures concerning the Committee are organised either by its own services or on behalf of the Committee by the joint services shared by the Committee and the CoR; observes that, in 2021, there were only 13 procurement procedures where the Committee was either the sole contracting authority or a participating contracting authority together with the CoR, out of which two were cancelled due to a lack of offers, two in the field of building works ran as open procedures with the Committee as a participating contracting authority, and the remaining ran via negotiated procedure, seven for middle and low value contracts and two without prior publication of a contract notice as foreseen by the Financial Regulation;
13. Underlines that, between April and June 2021, several meetings of the budget committee of the Council discussed the proposal by the Committee for a specific allowance for remote attendance of Committee meetings; notes that the proposal by the CAF, supported by the Committee's quaestors and approved by the Council, sets the allowance for remote participation at EUR 145, which is half the allowance stipulated in Article 2(1) of Council Decision 2013/471/EU¹, applicable as per 1 July 2021 and limited to the period where there are travel difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; notes that the reimbursement requires a check of attendance at the meeting or event for each participant via a variety of methods such as signature lists, electronic connection reports, screen shots or other reports showing interventions made, and that only based on that information can a reimbursement take place; highlights that in the event of remote attendance, only the reduced allowance is paid and that no other reimbursements (such as for travel costs or travel allowances) are made after the check of attendance and a check that no other third-party contribution was received; considers nevertheless that allowance, albeit reduced, difficult to understand in terms of public opinion as it could lead to reputational damage for the Committee; considers further that

¹ Council Decision 2013/471/EU of 23 September 2013 on the granting of daily allowances to and the reimbursement of travelling expenses of members of the European Economic and Social Committee and their alternates (OJ L 253, 25.9.2013, p. 22).

since the sanitary measures and measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic have been lifted, the allowance for remote attendance of meetings is no longer necessary;

Internal management, performance and internal control

14. Notes that 2021 was another year where the Committee was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which a series of decisions were taken to enable the Committee's main bodies to continue to function despite the limitation imposed by safety and security concerns; observes that such decisions concerned format of meetings, building access requirements, event management and other health and safety measures, including physical distancing and the carrying out of meetings in remote format, which later became hybrid format, including hybrid voting and use of electronic workflows;
15. Acknowledges the new management plan adopted by the Committee in 2021, defining the strategy of its secretariat-general and the five core values and five key strategic objectives that will steer its work over the next five years and establishing the annual strategic objectives directly linked to the management plan that, for 2021, include 33 objectives designed for all parts of its administration;
16. Points out the role of the CAF that prepares all decisions of a financial or budgetary nature for the Committee's bureau and is organised with ad hoc subgroups targeting ad hoc subjects more efficiently, each composed of three members, one from each group represented in the Committee;
17. Welcomes the Committee's integrated business analysis programme, aiming to capture and map all underlying business processes having an influence on the spending forecasting for budget lines, which is expected to help identify potential root causes of variances between the spending forecasting and the final costs of activities, leading to further improvement of the sound and efficient management of available human and financial resources to support the political activities of the members of the Committee;
18. Is concerned by the scarce resources available for the Committee's internal audit service (IAS) whose staffing level has a direct impact on the volume and quality of the work carried out and therefore on the assurance that the IAS can provide on the risk and control environment; understands that, as of November 2021, an assistant from outside the IAS is contributing to the work of the three members of staff currently deployed to the IAS, but believes that such temporary additional allocation does not ensure compliance with the international standards governing the minimum endowment of an internal audit function; expresses its support of the Committee's proposal to convert the assistant post already existing within the IAS to an administrator post in order to strengthen the internal audit in the short term; calls on the Committee and on the CoR to optimise the coordination of their respective internal audit services when implementing the cooperation agreement between the Committee and the CoR;
19. Acknowledges that the Committee took steps to implement the internal control standards with regard to assessing sensitive functions by adopting a detailed policy in December 2020 that includes the definition of sensitive posts and the methodology to be used for assessing the risks associated with all posts; notes that a Committee-wide assessment was concluded in 2021; remarks, however, that the findings of the IAS revealed room for improvement; observes that the internal audit on salary payments in 2018, the undue allowance payment detected by the Court in 2019 and the further

internal audit on verification in 2020 indicated a need for a closer examination of controls in the management of statutory rights; asks the Committee to inform Parliament about the punctual follow-up to audit findings;

20. Observes that key activity and performance indicators are an effective management tool and notes their interpretation in the COVID-19 pandemic scenario, hence the weighted importance acknowledged with respect to trends in communication, physical meetings, workplace relations, copy shop productivity and interpretation; .
21. Notes that the Committee pursues its mission through opinions, which refer to legislative proposals made by the Commission (referrals), and own-initiative opinions, which call on the Union institutions to take action, and that the Committee's positions can be highlighted in resolutions or included in evaluation and information reports;
22. Observes that, in 2021, the Committee adopted 200 opinions (compared to 131 in 2020 and 127 in 2019) out of which 151 opinions were based on referrals, 28 were own-initiative opinions and 12 were exploratory opinions (opinions based on referrals amounted to 65 and 59 in 2020 and 2019 respectively); welcomes the decision to launch a pilot project on reinforced follow-up of opinions issued, aiming to strengthen the monitoring of the actions undertaken by the institutions in question on a selected list of opinions of political or strategic importance in relation to the work programme of the sections of the Committee and the Committee's contribution to the annual work programme of the Commission, to be carried out between September 2022 and April 2023; understands that such reinforced follow-up includes a reinforced role for the Committee's rapporteur in relation to the different actors in the legislative process, including presence at Parliament committee meetings and outreach-oriented tailor-made communication;
23. Observes that the relevant Report on the implementation of the Cooperation Agreement between the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee shows, in 2021, a doubling of the number of meetings with Parliament counterparts in the preparation of the Committee's opinions compared to 2020 which confirms the Committee's presence in the legislative cycle and calls on the Committee to ensure that its opinions are shared with the members of the relevant committees of Parliament, in line with the cooperation agreement between Parliament, on the one hand, and the Committee and the CoR, on the other hand; notes that, in addition to bilateral meetings on ongoing files, members of both Parliament and the Committee took part in various events, conferences and meetings and that 156 meetings were held with Parliament counterparts, 538 meetings with Commission counterparts and 139 meetings with Council and Member States counterparts;
24. Notes the wide participation and positive feedback with regard to the bimonthly webinars of the European circular economy community (EU Circular Talks), and to the EU Organic Awards representing the first example of Union-wide organic awards, jointly organised by the Commission, the Committee, the CoR, the European Voice of Farmers and Agri-Cooperatives and the European umbrella organisation for organic food and farming (IFOAM - Organics Europe); observes that, in 2021, some high-level conferences were organised with positive attendance results, such as the civil society conference on the Geopolitics of the Green Deal, the high-level public conference on Energy poverty at the crossroads of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the

European Green Deal, and the high level conference on Youth Policy in the Western Balkans; appreciates the importance of the Committee in ensuring the social aspect of the green transition;

25. Notes that the Committee, through the work of its ad-hoc group on the Conference on the Future of Europe, directly organised or supported the roll-out of 75 events, 33 at national level and 42 at central level, and that 60 % of those 75 events produced reports on the Conference platform with those 45 events alone gathering more than 7 600 participants; notes that the Committee also encoded 60 new ideas on the Conference platform and launched a vast communication campaign on social media and that many of those ideas fed into the 325 final proposals adopted in May 2022;

Human resources, equality and staff well-being

26. Notes that, in 2021, despite the limitations imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Committee managed to guarantee safe working conditions; points out the actions carried out by its medical service, including continuously updating public health rules for the premises and keeping staff informed via in-person and on-line psycho-social support continuously offered to the staff and up-to-date scientific medical information provided to members, staff, and the administration, together with active participation in the Commission's vaccination campaign; underlines the synergies established with Parliament with regard to COVID-19 testing;
27. Remarks that the Committee reports that there were 699 members of staff employed on 31 December 2021, compared to 702 in both 2020 and 2019; notes that, in 2021, the number of posts in the Committee's establishment plan increased from 668 to 699, which was foreseen in 2020; points out that the occupation rate for budget posts was 94,3 % in 2021, slightly lower than the occupation rate in 2020, 2019 and 2018, which were 95,5 %, 96 % and 96,6 % respectively, and observes that the recruitment of 74 new members of staff were finalised in 2021, compared to 58 and 57 in 2020 and 2019 respectively;
28. Observes that a large number of temporary and contract agents were employed in 2021 (107 temporary agents and 46 contract agents out of a total of 699 staff, compared to 93 and 81 temporary agents in 2020 and 2019 respectively, and to 47 and 43 contract agents in 2020 and 2019 respectively); expresses concern that this situation entails the risk of considerable loss of knowledge and expertise for the Committee when those temporary employment contracts come to an end; invites the Committee to further deepen its administrative cooperation with the CoR via the joint services arrangement to enhance the synergic effects of pooling staff;
29. Notes that, in terms of the establishment plan, the cut in human resources appears to have had an impact on the Committee that exceeds the 5 % target established by the Commission (staff reductions of 7,98 % compared to 2013 figures); is aware that the additional priorities taken on board in recent years and those still to come have resulted in the Committee's request for additional resources in the context of the 2023 budget preparation (three additional administrator posts);
30. Appreciates that to speed up the recruitment process for management positions, the Committee's directorate for human resources and finance has taken measures to raise awareness among the group presidents and heads of group secretariats on the need to

plan selections and recruitment ahead in order to avoid, in the interest of the service, extended periods of *ad interim* positions and managers having double posts, and instructions have been given to the staff dealing with recruitment, accompanied by a proactive policy in publishing vacant posts; notes that the directorate for human resources and finance devised a detailed action plan for recruitment and the retention of staff, which was approved by the Committee's management board in October 2021, structured around forward planning, raising attractiveness and talent retention;

31. Notes the majority of the Committee's staff is composed of women (448 out of 699), in both the assistant category and the administrator category; welcomes the well-balanced gender representation in middle and senior management functions with 52 % women and 48 % men in such positions, compared to 46 % women and 54 % men in 2020 and 48 % women and 52 % men in 2019; appreciates the action of the Committee's equal opportunities officer in shaping the upcoming diversity and inclusion strategy and action plan and is aware that the CAF is looking into the practical implementation of gender budgeting in public institutions, based on information given by external speakers, including the chair of Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, which will be brought forward via an in-depth analysis of the ways in which this tool could help to address gender equality;
32. Underlines that, while the staff come from all Member States, given that Member States are not proportionally represented, the Committee's geographical balance is not satisfactory; observes that managers from the 13 Member States that joined the Union after 2004 made up 19 % in 2021 (same level as 2019), compared to 15 % in 2020, while the distribution of administrators per grade shows that 65 % of administrators from those Member States are currently in grades AD 8 – AD 10, making them eligible to apply for a management position; calls on the Committee to continue to take action, to make greater efforts and to commit itself to reach a balanced geographical distribution of nationals from all Member States within its staff, with a particular focus on the management level, taking into consideration the representation of Member States that joined the Union after 2004;
33. Observes that the measures adopted in order to tackle limitations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, included the provision of a laptop and a headset to all staff members, , the provision of ergonomic chairs on duly justified medical grounds, the provision, in 2020, of a limited lump sum to cover extraordinary costs incurred during the mandatory teleworking period and upon individual request, the provision, in 2021, of the possibility of an additional screen if essential for medical reasons, and, as per April 2021 onwards during a period of six months, a temporary monthly allowance of EUR 20 to members of staff and trainees to cover additional costs of a varying nature;
34. Urges the Committee to adopt an updated diversity and inclusion strategy and action plan; expects that such strategy and action plan will take stock of the lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic, offer flexible tools to match diverse needs among different staff groups and promote diversity and inclusion but also work-life balance and equal opportunities for its staff; asks the Committee to inform Parliament about progress in that regard;
35. Notes that, in 2021, the Committee assessed its action plan for equal opportunities and diversity in order to launch the drawing up of an upscaled diversity and inclusion

strategy; observes that online events were organised on the occasion of the International Day against Homophobia and that the Committee took part in the conference of the Inter-Institutional Joint Committee on Equal Opportunities and in various interinstitutional networks in the field of diversity and equal opportunities; encourages the Committee to continue endorsing bottom-up initiatives that contribute to making the Committee a more inclusive workplace; asks the Committee to include, in the upcoming diversity and inclusion strategy and action plan on, specific actions on recruiting and on-boarding of candidates with disabilities and to pay similar attention to accessibility and mobility when carrying out building renovation;

36. Notes that the working conditions in place provide for a high degree of flexibility and that, while forward planning is required, time recording is no longer obligatory; observes that, as the Committee opted for an exemption from working time registration in 2020 and 2021, adaptation of the schedule to individual needs is possible, as long as service needs are fulfilled and work-life balance in difficult circumstances is facilitated;
37. Observes that the change in working conditions following the COVID-19 pandemic had an influence on the uptake rate of non-standard working time arrangements and that, as from spring 2020, the requests for non-standard working time arrangements have steadily declined; remarks that in 2021, and for the first time since 2016, the percentage of staff requiring a suitable non-standard working time arrangement fell below 20 % (18,88 % in 2021 compared to 23,93 % and 32,19 % in 2020 and 2019 respectively); points out that the decrease in applications between 2020 and 2021 mainly concerns women, with around one in five applying for a non-standard working pattern in 2021, while the figure for men remains stable (32 men in 2020 compared to 31 men in 2021); observes that while there was a significant increase in the number of men using flexible working patterns in 2019, the proportion between men and women remained approximately the same in 2020 and 2021 with approximately one fifth of applications being made by men;
38. Notes that during 2021 and in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking remained the norm but that, as from 14 June 2021, staff could gradually return to the office one day per week on a voluntary basis, while respecting the precautionary measures in place in the premises; notes that teleworking from abroad was possible for all staff during a limited time period and under specific conditions, such as for particularly difficult family situations with compelling medical or social reasons; welcomes that the right to disconnect, already enshrined in the previous decision concerning the teleworking scheme, is now explicitly mentioned in the Committee's revised decision on working conditions that entered into force on 1 April 2022; encourages the Committee to explore the long-term teleworking solutions in the post-pandemic environment.
39. Welcomes the launching of a survey in March 2021, coordinated by the Committee and the CoR, to assess the experience of all members of staff of the long period of teleworking and to identify possible guidelines for the future; understands that more than 71 % of staff, including managers, gave their feedback, which was largely positive in respect of the limitations that were imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and provided indications that were taken into account for the preparation of the revised decision on working conditions, which was drafted in 2021 and after extensive social dialogue entered into force on 1 April 2022, as a pilot project for six months;

40. Regrets that, also in 2021, the Committee was not able to provide data on cases of burnout within the staff of the Committee; respects the data protection limitations, but reminds the Committee of the importance of anonymised statistical data for managerial decisions within an organisation while also expressing the need to safeguard staff well-being; reiterates that awareness-raising actions, good practices in relation to workload management, communication and conflict solving, as well as return-to-work policy, should be taken into account;
41. Notes that, in 2021, the Committee prepared and discussed a revised decision on procedures for preventing and dealing with psychological and sexual harassment at work (Decision 090/22A) which was only adopted in March 2022; observes that this is part of a wider action plan on ethics adopted in January 2021, based on the recommendations of a joint working group comprised of staff and administration representatives; reiterates its regret regarding the slow adoption of that new decision, which unfortunately does not include a specific procedure for harassment involving a Member and an official (within the definition of Decision 090/22 A) with the consequence that no uniform procedures for dealing with cases of harassment is applied, leading to victims being treated differently; calls on the Committee to immediately provide for a specific procedure that will grant everyone proper and long due protection against harassment; believes that only a zero tolerance policy on harassment will prevent the Committee from future allegations of harassment and serious misconduct;
42. Notes that, in 2021, the Committee hosted 52 trainees for a five month term, 4 trainees for a three month term and 2 trainees who were on grants awarded by external public bodies; notes that the trainees with a term of five months received a monthly grant and allowances while the shorter term trainees were not entitled to any financial contribution; welcomes that, following also the call from Parliament during the 2020 discharge procedure, an internal reflection is ongoing to ensure that all trainees receive a decent remuneration and that a new framework clarifying the rights and obligations of trainees has been drafted, is currently undergoing consultation with the Committee's legal service and its staff committee and is expected to be in place for the next traineeship session starting in March 2023;
43. Reiterates its call on the Committee to integrate the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic in its internal management strategy in terms of business continuity and crisis management, IT responsiveness, resilience of the organisation, duty of care towards its staff, effective communication and flexible working processes, in order to develop a result-oriented management style that can encourage a healthy work-life balance;

Ethical framework and transparency

44. Welcomes the update of the Committee's code of conduct in January 2021 with strengthened sanctions and with a broader scope, establishing a more efficient mechanism to handle infringements by members, and is aware of the revision of its rules of procedure that followed in March 2022; appreciates the adoption, in January 2021, of a detailed action plan on ethics based on the recommendations of a joint working group comprised of staff and administration representatives;
45. Underlines the importance of the internal audit on ethics and integrity aiming to provide reasonable assurance as to the consistent alignment of, and adherence to, shared ethical

values, principles and norms for upholding and prioritising public interest over private interests; reiterates the call to consider also an external audit on ethics and transparency;

46. Observes that, following the entry into force of the Committee's revised decision on whistleblowing on 15 December 2021 (Decision 297/21A), as well as of the revised decision on procedures for preventing and dealing with psychological and sexual harassment at work (Decision 090/22A), adopted on 31 March 2022, the renewed ethical legal framework will be completed with a revised decision laying down general implementing provisions on disciplinary procedures and administrative enquiries; encourages the Committee to ensure that such process entails consultation with its legal service and data protection officer and dialogue with its staff committee and the Union's Staff Regulations Committee;
47. Notes that the settlement agreements related to European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) case OC/2018/0666/A1 have finally been fully implemented with respect to all staff members concerned; regrets the slow reaction by the Committee in concluding and implementing the settlements; notes that, as regards the former Committee member identified by OLAF as a victim of serious misconduct, following talks in March 2021 an agreement was found with regard to the ways to remedy the issue, centred on the strengthening the Committee's code of conduct, strengthening the ethical framework, giving priority to finding fair settlements and providing public apologies to victims;
48. Welcomes that, on 13 April 2022, the Committee's President made a public statement, published on the Committee's website, addressing her official apology on behalf of the Committee to all the victims, both members of staff and the former member, identified in OLAF case OC/2018/0666/A1; reiterates its concern that the Committee's secretary-general still refuses to admit the internal shortcomings and responsibilities, leading to a breach of duty of care towards the staff of the Committee;
49. Underlines that, on 6 October 2022, by its ruling in case C-673/21², the Court of Justice confirmed the legality of the measures taken by the decision of 9 June 2020 of the Committee's bureau;
50. Observes that the Committee is a civil party in an ongoing legal case initiated by the national authorities against a former member accused of perpetrating misconduct that is currently before a Belgian court pending a competent decision; asks the Committee to inform Parliament about the development of that case in a timely manner;
51. Deeply regrets that Parliament's unambiguous calls for an external and independent investigation specifically to review the Committee's procedures with respect to human resources and the effectiveness thereof, with a focus on identifying the responsibilities of the administrative hierarchy in addressing harassment claims and ensuring the well-being of staff, are still being ignored; urges the Committee to take all necessary measures to efficiently prevent potential cases of harassment in the future; believes that it is essential to guarantee the well-being of staff and to effectively and swiftly prevent further cases, such as the one that has already occurred;
52. Points out that, in 2021, OLAF investigated two cases involving the Committee of

² Judgment of the Court of Justice of 6 October 2022, *KN v European Economic and Social Committee*, C-673/21, ECLI:EU:C:2022:759.

which one, opened in 2019 and involving a member of the Committee, was closed in 2022 as OLAF did not establish any evidence of fraud or irregularity affecting the financial or other interests of the Union, and the other, also concerning a member, was closed by OLAF in 2021 as the European Public Prosecutor Office (EPPO) had initiated a parallel criminal law investigation over the same facts; remarks that another case from 2020, also involving a member, was closed by OLAF in 2022 as the member concerned passed away in the meantime;

53. Remarks that to date one case, reported to Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control by the Committee in 2020, is still open for which the appointing authority of the Committee intended to take its final decision by the end of 2022; notes that, based on the comments made at the initial hearing of both parties, a complementary enquiry to further investigate several points and to hear additional witnesses was launched and completed before the summer break in 2022; deeply regrets that this internal investigation has so far already taken two years without any final conclusion, seriously hampering the lives of the persons involved and blocking its potential transfer to OLAF; asks the Committee to deliver its final decision as soon as possible and inform the Parliament about the outcome;
54. Appreciates the Committee's willingness to cooperate with the investigative bodies of the Union (OLAF and EPPO); notes that a service-level agreement relating to the conduct of internal administrative enquiries was signed with the investigation and disciplinary office of the Commission in 2021o;
55. Welcomes that the Committee's revised code of conduct introduced in January 2021 contains specific provisions on the declaration of financial interests and on conflicts of interest; remarks that a new provision was integrated in the code according to which members, delegates of the its consultative commission on industrial change, alternates and experts must submit a declaration of their financial interests to the president of the Committee upon taking up their duties, which must be resubmitted on an annual basis on 1 January and, in case of any change during a member's term of office, at the earliest possible but in any event within two months; points out that the revised code of conduct entails specific provisions on revolving doors and foresees that, for a period of two years after ceasing to hold office, a former member shall not lobby present members or staff on matters for which they are holding important positions or writing reports; asks for the periodic publication and update on its official website of the information about the state of compliance for both financial declarations and derogations to the cooling-off period;
56. Notes with satisfaction that training on ethics became mandatory for all members of staff in 2021 and that it includes additional, more specific training dedicated to managers; observes that training for members of the Committee on ethics has been revised to align with the new code of conduct and to cover the full range of ethical issues; appreciates the setting up of a new team of ethics counsellors to provide the best possible advice to colleagues who consult them on ethical questions, including on the Committee's internal rules on the protection of whistle-blowers against negative action and their right to stay anonymous, and to support them during the process, and that information on ethics counsellors is disseminated to all newcomers; underlines that a new guide for staff at the Committee on respect at work was published in May 2022 and that the Committee is also in the process of establishing a new charter of values of the

staff at the Committee;

57. Strongly encourages the Committee to further explore its participation to the Interinstitutional Transparency Register through the assessment process launched, to that aim, in 2022;
58. Is concerned that the Committee has so far not adopted any anti-fraud strategy; calls on the Committee to launch an internal fraud risk analysis and to coordinate with other competent services of the Commission with a view to considering the adoption of an adequate internal anti-fraud strategy;
59. Calls for an end to the use of external companies that, according to Yale University's ranking³, continue to operate in Russia;

Digitalisation, cybersecurity and data protection

60. Remarks that the Committee made efforts to support the recovery process following the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular to benefit more from the increased digitalisation, and that actions in the areas of digitalisation and cybersecurity continued to be guided by the Committee's digital strategy;
61. Notes that the initial IT budget for 2021 was EUR 5 400 000 compared to EUR 4 700 000 in 2020, thus an increase of EUR 700 000 (15 %); observes that as a result of transfers of unused appropriations amounting to EUR 1 900 000 in order to further address the backlog in IT which was acknowledged in previous discharge exercises, the final amount of appropriations for IT in 2021 was EUR 7 300 000 compared to EUR 7 500 000 in 2020;
62. Notes that the new administrative cooperation agreement with the CoR, which entered into force on 1 November 2021, fosters the exchange of good digital practices to drive its IT and digital services forward;
63. Notes the increased number of cyber-threats to the IT infrastructure and online communication channels of the Committee and notes that the Committee has paid increasing attention to strengthening the IT system configuration, identifying vulnerabilities in cooperation with the Computer Emergency Response Team for the EU Institutions, bodies and agencies (CERT-EU), raising the cybersecurity awareness of members and staff and adopting an advanced computer-network authentication protocol; calls on the Committee to keep paying a high level of attention to cybersecurity matters, especially because the number of serious cyber-attacks increased considerably in recent years, making the Union institutions attractive targets for potential attackers; encourages the Committee to carry out regular risk assessments of its IT infrastructure and to ensure regular audits and tests of its cyber defences;
64. Notes that the Committee is using open-source technology and that, in 2021, a growing number of open-source libraries and frameworks were used in the Committee's information systems; underlines that the Committee's digital strategy foresees the migration from the current on-premises email application to one hosted in the cloud as

³ <https://som.yale.edu/story/2022/over-1000-companies-have-curtailed-operations-russia-some-remain>

part of the development of a hybrid cloud environment;

65. Remarks that the majority of the Committee's technical systems are hosted internally and managed by internal staff, while for the outsourced systems control and ownership is retained and ensured at contractual level and complemented by organisational and technical measures, including data protection impact and risk assessment exercises that follow sector-wide best practices;

Buildings and security

66. Recalls that, following the exercise of the purchase options on the JDE building in 2018 and on the BvS and REM buildings in 2019, both the Committee and the CoR became owners of those buildings; notes that the buildings on Trèves 74 (TR74) and on Belliard 68 (B68-72) are under a long-term finance lease; notes that, on 10 May 2021, the budgetary authority approved the take-over of the rental contract, as per September 2021, by the Committee and the CoR of the former European External Action Service (EEAS) building on Belliard 100 (B100), and that the TR74 and B68-72 buildings were transferred to the Commission in September 2022 as part of an exchange of the VanMaerlant building (VMA);
67. Is aware that the exchange of buildings resulted in a significant reduction of office space for the Committee and the CoR, a loss of approximately 10 000 m²; notes that an administrative agreement with the EEAS was signed for the takeover of the rental contract for the B100 building from 1 September 2021 to partially compensate for that reduction of office space and that, following that agreement, the final result is the reduction of office space of approximately 5 000 m² compared to the situation at the beginning of 2021;
68. Acknowledges that the leading component of the building strategy of geographical concentration was pursued with the exchange of the TR74 and B68 buildings for the VMA building; understands that the building exchange carried out requires additional intervention to provide a fitting working environment for the new tenants, and that refurbishment and renovation works were approved in June 2021, with a view to allowing a more flexible layout of office spaces so that they can be easily adapted to new forms of work, in addition to further limit energy and water consumption, to be financed via a mopping-up transfer;
69. Notes that for the important refurbishment works carried out in 2021 in cooperation with the CoR, the corresponding budget line 'Fitting-out of premises' was allocated EUR 4 925 895 in 2021, compared to EUR 1 121 655 and EUR 594 061 in 2020 and 2019 respectively;

Environment and sustainability

70. Welcomes the positive environmental accomplishments in 2021, as regards electricity, water and paper consumption (reductions of 2,1 %, 14,3 % and 55 % respectively compared to 2020); notes the installation of solar panels on two of the buildings of the Committee and the CoR and understands that further analysis is being carried out with the aim of extending the solar panel installation, likely in 2023;
71. Highlights that 69,6 % of the Committee staff use eco-friendly means of transport; notes

the mobility policy in place, promoting the use of sustainable travel modes for commuting, that includes a financial contribution to public transport tickets and a monthly contribution for cyclists; notes that service bicycles are available as well as chargers for electric service cars;

72. Welcomes the innovative initiative on low emission missions launched in October 2021, aiming to encourage staff going on missions to opt for less-polluting means of transport (train, bus, etc.) and meaning that the travel agency proposes travel options in ascending order of CO₂ emissions generated;

Interinstitutional cooperation

73. Believes that administrative cooperation and research of synergies with other institutions represent an important management tool for a small institution like the Committee;
74. Is aware of the cooperation with the CoR via the joint services where some 460 members of staff (of which approximately 290 belong to the Committee) and more than EUR 55 million yearly (of which more than EUR 30 million comes from the Committee) are pooled together by both committees; acknowledges that the current administrative cooperation agreement between the Committee and the CoR, that entered into force on 1 November 2021 with a duration of five years, has reinforced the governance of the cooperation and the control mechanisms and is a renewed expression of the will to efficiently share resources and create synergies; notes that the current administrative cooperation agreement includes the creation of a directorate for innovation and information technology and, within the already existing joint services, the establishment of a centralised public procurement and financial management unit and a procurement expert group;
75. Observes that the Committee outsources a certain number of services to other institutions, in particular to the Commission, via service level agreements with different services of that institution (the Paymaster Office and the Directorates-General for Budget, for Human Resources and for Digitalisation) for the provision of key software tools; notes that specific ad-hoc agreements have been concluded with Parliament and the Commission to deal with some aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic; observes that the Committee also benefits from participation in interinstitutional tender procedures led by the Commission or by Parliament in the areas of IT, corporate travel, insurance, transport, leasing of vehicles, and audio-visual equipment;
76. Notes that negotiations with a view to reviewing the cooperation protocol with the Commission started in 2021;

Communication

77. Notes that, in 2021, the budget assigned for communication was around EUR 1,5 million, and it was mainly dedicated to online activities aimed at specific target groups (civil society organisations and Union institutions), including press and media relations, organising events and outreach activities, and enhancing online communication and visits to the Committee;
78. Observes that, in the second semester of 2021, the Committee started working on its

external communication strategy aiming to improve the quality, outreach and impact of its communication; notes that the Committee's communication commission decided, as an overarching priority, to improve image, impact and governance and to better integrate communication into legislative work; observes that, to this end, the Committee streamlined its communication during and around the plenaries to make sure that each opinion is communicated to the right audience, with the most appropriate tools available and at the most appropriate time; encourages the Committee to adopt a comprehensive communication framework integrating the lessons learnt from the two COVID-19 years in order to be prepared against possible future disruptive events and to ensure business continuity;

79. Notes with satisfaction that the Committee is member of the social media working group of the Interinstitutional Online Communication Committee, and that it has been involved in discussions on the pilot phase of two social media platforms, EU Voice and EU Video, that contribute to the Union's strategy for data and digital sovereignty; observes that the two platforms are part of decentralised, free and open-source social media networks that connect users in a privacy-oriented and advertising-free environment;.
80. Reiterates its call to the Committee to increase its communication efforts to strengthen the link with citizens by endorsing greater transparency in its operations, by intensifying the use of digital technologies and by pursuing a communication strategy that allows the correct perception and understanding of the Committee's role and of the way it fits into the Union's vision.

INFORMATION ON ADOPTION IN COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE

Date adopted	28.2.2023
Result of final vote	+: 23 -: 3 0: 1
Members present for the final vote	Gilles Boyer, Olivier Chastel, Caterina Chinnici, Corina Crețu, Ryszard Czarnecki, José Manuel Fernandes, Luke Ming Flanagan, Daniel Freund, Isabel García Muñoz, Monika Hohlmeier, Jean-François Jalkh, Mislav Kolakušić, Joachim Kuhs, Alin Mituța, Jan Olbrycht, Markus Pieper, Michèle Rivasi, Sándor Rónai, Petri Sarvamaa, Eleni Stavrou, Angelika Winzig, Lara Wolters, Tomáš Zdechovský
Substitutes present for the final vote	Eider Gardiazabal Rubial, Elżbieta Rafalska
Substitutes under Rule 209(7) present for the final vote	Fabienne Keller, Katrin Langensiepen

FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE

23	+
ECR	Ryszard Czarnecki, Elżbieta Rafalska
PPE	José Manuel Fernandes, Monika Hohlmeier, Jan Olbrycht, Petri Sarvamaa, Eleni Stavrou, Angelika Winzig, Tomáš Zdechovský
Renew	Gilles Boyer, Olivier Chastel, Fabienne Keller, Alin Mituța
S&D	Caterina Chinnici, Corina Crețu, Isabel García Muñoz, Eider Gardiazabal Rubial, Sándor Rónai, Lara Wolters
The Left	Luke Ming Flanagan
Verts/ALE	Daniel Freund, Katrin Langensiepen, Michèle Rivasi

3	-
ID	Jean-François Jalkh, Joachim Kuhs
NI	Mislav Kolakušić

1	0
PPE	Markus Pieper

Key to symbols:

+ : in favour

- : against

0 : abstention