

RESOLUTION (EU) 2022/1732 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**of 4 May 2022****with observations forming an integral part of the decision on discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) for the financial year 2020**

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT,

- having regard to its decision on discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Union Aviation Safety Agency for the financial year 2020,
 - having regard to Rule 100 of and Annex V to its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the opinion of the Committee on Transport and Tourism,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A9-0122/2022),
- A. whereas, according to its statement of revenue and expenditure ⁽¹⁾, the final budget of the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (the ‘Agency’) for the financial year 2020 was EUR 183 042 000, representing a decrease of 6,81 % compared to 2019; whereas EUR 37 954 000 of the Agency’s budget derives from the Union budget and EUR 90 000 000 is revenue from fees and charges ⁽²⁾; whereas the COVID-19 crisis led to a significant reduction in the Agency’s revenue from fees and charges of EUR 18 000 000 (– 15 %);
- B. whereas the Court of Auditors (the ‘Court’), in its report on the annual accounts of the European Union Aviation Safety Agency for the financial year 2020 (the ‘Court’s report’), states that it has obtained reasonable assurance that the Agency’s annual accounts are reliable and that the underlying transactions are legal and regular;

Budget and financial management

1. Notes with satisfaction that the budget monitoring efforts during the financial year 2020 resulted in a budget implementation rate of 98,62 %, representing an increase of 1,93 % compared to 2019; furthermore, notes that the payment appropriations execution rate was 92,65 %, showing an increase of 3,59 % compared to 2019;
2. Notes that the Agency ended the year with a fees and charges surplus of EUR 9,4 million; notes that the ‘fees and charges’ surplus is added to the accumulated surplus, increasing it from EUR 51,5 million to EUR 60,9 million;
3. Notes that the rate of cancelled appropriations relating to commitments carried over to 2020 increased to 5,46 % (3,7 % in 2019), above the 2,5 % target set by the Agency in its 2020 performance indicators and slightly above the 5 % ceiling set by the Commission. This was mainly due to the COVID-19 crisis and to the cancellations related to global travel restrictions, confinement measures, reduction in activities and cancellation of events; recommends that measures are taken to reach the 2,5% target;

Performance

4. Notes that the Agency uses certain measures as key performance indicators (KPIs) to assess the added value provided by its activities and other measures to improve its budget management; notes that in 2020 the Agency monitored 59 KPIs, including targets to enhance budget administration such as a budget implementation rate equal to or greater than 95 %, commitment carry-over implementation rate equal to or lower than 5 %, fees and charges (F&C) revenue project implementation rate, and F&C outsourcing performance; notes, in addition, that, key programmes/projects are implemented by the Agency such as the transformation programme, with the key objectives of modernising ways of working, simplifying processes and providing digital services to its external stakeholders, thereby aiming to achieve cost efficiency gains of at least 8 % compared to 2019 and deliver overall efficiency gains of 20–25 % at Agency level by 2025; calls on the Agency to report on the future developments of its performance;

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 114, 31.3.2021, p. 81.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 114, 31.3.2021, p. 78.

5. Notes that the Agency, as an aviation sector regulator, has been widely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; welcomes the fact that the Agency has refocused its business continuity plan to the specific COVID-19 health and safety aspects for the Agency's staff members, aviation personnel, passengers and other stakeholders in the aviation sector in general; notes that the Agency revised its Annual Work Programme in March 2020 complementing the existing priorities and objectives by actively supporting its stakeholders and addressing the new challenges; notes from the Agency's replies to the Standard Questionnaire that despite around 35 to 40 % of objectives/KPIs being impacted by the pandemic the Agency was able to achieve 90 % of its Annual Work Programme targets;
6. Takes note that, due to withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the Union, the Agency had to take back oversight of 129 third country organisations that were previously outsourced to the UK Civilian Aviation Authority;
7. Salutes in particular the work the Agency performed on the project for the return of the Boeing 737 Max to service in Europe, demonstrating strong leadership and resilience;
8. Salutes the Agency's swift response to the COVID-19 crisis, which provided the basis for a clear and harmonised approach across Europe; notes that such swift response included the publication of the Aviation Health Safety Protocol – together with the European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and Control (ECDC) – providing clear operational guidance and risk-based recommendations for air travel, the launch of a charter programme with airlines and aerodromes operators to monitor the implementation of the Protocol, the initiation of the Return to Normal Operations (RNO) project and the creation of the COVID-19 Safety Risk Portfolio; calls on the Commission to work together with the Agency to ensure that Member States' response to the current epidemiological situation remains aligned and coordinated and focuses on a 'person-based approach' linked to the EU Digital COVID Certificate;
9. Takes note that the COVID-19 situation impacted heavily on the Agency's ability to progress on international activities, in particular technical assistance projects, due to the extended travel restrictions, the unavailability of international counterparts/ stakeholders and social distancing;
10. Welcomes the continuous efforts by the Agency to look into areas for further cooperation with other Union Agencies where feasible, taking into account the nature of activities, to reduce potential overlaps; welcomes the concrete actions already taken with the European Railway Agency, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, the European Food Safety Agency, the European Training Foundation, the European Securities and Markets Authority and the European Environmental Agency; strongly encourages the Agency to seek further and broader cooperation with all Union agencies;
11. Notes that the Agency launched its corporate transformation programme, 'Destination: Futureproof', that incorporates the ongoing digitalisation initiative (CORAL), with the key objectives of modernising ways of working, simplifying processes and providing digital services to its external stakeholders; notes that the programme is expected to run until 2023 and is expected to deliver overall efficiency gains of 20 to 25 % by 2025;
12. Notes that the Agency is outsourcing some recurring tasks to Member States in order to free up highly skilled experts, so that they are available for more strategic tasks; acknowledges the continuous efforts by the Agency to become more efficient, freeing up resources, including qualified staff;
13. Welcomes the fact that the Agency signed a research contract funded by Horizon 2020 to improve the ICAO Annex 16 Volume II engine emissions sampling and measurement requirements and to propose more robust design and measurement techniques;

Staff policy

14. Notes that, on 31 December 2020, the establishment plan was 94,26 % implemented, with 641 temporary agents appointed out of 680 temporary agents authorised under the Union budget (compared to 680 authorised posts in 2019); notes that, in addition, 88 contract agents and 15 seconded national experts worked for the Agency in 2020;

15. Notes with concern the lack of gender balance within the Agency's senior management, with 20 out of 25 (80 %) being men, and in the Agency's management board, with 60 out of 80 (75 %) being men; notes the gender balance within the Agency's overall staff, with 508 out of 744 (68,3 %) being men; asks the Agency to ensure gender balance at management and staff levels in the future; reiterates its call on the Commission and the Member States to take the importance of ensuring gender balance into account when nominating their members to the management board of the Agency;
16. Welcomes steps taken by the Agency to achieve gender balance, such as the encouragement of female applications during selection procedures, offering favourable working conditions and flexible arrangements linked to maternity; encourages the Agency to add a Union-wide breakdown of gender by staff category in its consolidated staff figures to further inform on the gender balance within its staff;
17. Welcomes the setting up and running of a junior qualification programme; encourages the Agency to pursue the development of a long term Human Resources policy framework which addresses work-life balance, lifelong guidance and career development, gender balance, teleworking, geographical balance and recruitment and integration of people with disabilities;
18. Notes that, in response to the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on the aviation industry, the Agency has taken a more conservative approach towards recruitment, striving to achieve the right balance between business needs and available resources, favouring internal mobility and temporary sharing of resources between units; notes that the Agency implemented a resourcing planning model with quarterly reviews, balancing prioritised business talent demand and financial impact to assure that all tasks foreseen in the Strategic Planning document are implemented; notes, furthermore, that due to this new resourcing procedure the Agency had to put on hold some of the planned recruitments for 2020 to 2023;
19. Welcomes the efforts taken by the Agency to improve social dialogue on topics such as harassment prevention and staff support, which constitute important aspects for the running of the Agency's activities and the wellbeing of its employees; notes that the Agency, following social dialogue, reached an agreement in July 2020 on containment measures to respond to the global crisis; recalls the increasing rate of trade union affiliation of the Agency's staff and acknowledges the statement of the Agency that trade union affiliation has contributed to a wider consultation, and corresponds to a high level of uncertainty/concerns on the future of the aviation industry as a whole; points to the fact that according to the Agency, its management continues to be in frequent contact with its social partners to address social issues and calls on the Agency to keep the discharge authority informed on that matter;

Procurement

20. Notes from the Court's report, regarding follow-up of previous years' observations, that the Agency committed the funds for an agreement with the Commission on archiving services about eight months after the renewal of the agreement in 2018; notes that, according to the Financial Regulation, the commitment of funds should be recorded before entering into a legal obligation; takes note of the Agency's reply to implement an IT system that prevents any risk of entering legal commitments before budgetary commitments; calls on the Agency to report to the discharge authority on the developments in this regard;
21. Notes that, further to the replies provided to Parliament in the framework of the 2018 discharge, in which it was stated that risks concerning invoicing costs in the Agency's procurement procedures were addressed by an e-procurement solution, the Agency introduced several measures to considerably enhance contract management that resulted in further efficiency gains and of cost reductions; notes that the Agency reiterates the importance of contracts providing the best value for money and has taken steps to strengthen the role of actors involved in the procurement process, in particular contract managers;
22. Notes with regard to the follow-up of the 2019 Court's report that the Agency has taken actions to improve its IT systems, and is providing training courses to ensure that all financial commitments comply with the correspondent institutional legal adherences; calls on the Agency to report on the results of the actions taken;

23. Notes, regarding the follow-up of the Court's observations in 2020, that the Agency has implemented an e-submission tool for procurement procedures; notes that, for e-invoicing, the Agency has finalised its business specifications and is now seeking an IT solution that meets these specifications; calls on the Agency to report to the discharge authority on the developments in that regard;

Prevention and management of conflicts of interest, and transparency

24. Acknowledges the Agency's existing measures and ongoing efforts to ensure transparency, the prevention and management of conflict of interest, and the protection of whistleblowers; welcomes the fact that in 2020 there were no cases of conflict of interest; further notes that any potential cases in the Agency could be addressed with mitigating measures; notes that CVs and declarations of interest of most of the board members are published on the Agency's website;
25. Notes that, given its technical nature, the Agency runs open dialogues with aviation stakeholders, taking into consideration their views when deciding on rulemaking and certification procedures; further notes that all the technical workshops organised by the Agency with its aviation stakeholders are reflected on the events page of the Agency's website;
26. Calls on the Agency to continue to strive to maintain the highest international quality standards for its functioning, including its integrated management system;

Internal control

27. Notes that despite some delays experienced as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, all actions, proposed in response to the recommendations issued by the Internal Audit Service, were initiated and have the status 'in progress'; notes that the main recommendations involving the Agency comprised the execution of refresher training concerning fraud prevention and conflict of interests; further notes the advice to the Agency to monitor the duration of certification projects and the recommendation on control mechanisms for the management systems of the national aviation authorities; calls on the Agency to inform the discharge authority about the future developments on these topics;
28. Notes that in 2020, the internal audit capability performed five audit assurance engagements to assess whether the relevant regulations were complied with, process objectives were being met, and the key risks were properly mitigated within the Agency; notes that some recommendations were given to further enhance either the control environment or the overall efficiency of the processes;

COVID-19 response and business continuity

29. Notes that the Agency's response to the COVID-19 crisis focused on providing regulatory flexibility to the European aviation industry, ensuring the health safety of the passengers and front-line personnel, coordinating with international organisations to implement adequate measures to fight the spread of COVID-19, and adjusting priorities and working methods to the new realities and emerging challenges of the pandemic;
30. Notes that the Agency invested resources in completing back-log projects, supporting the COVID-19 working threads and advancing strategic priorities such as environment, innovation and future developments, including drones; further notes that the crisis led also to a significant reduction in the Agency's fees and charges revenue by EUR 18 000 000, which was 15 % lower compared to the initial 2020 plan; notes, however, that the Agency was able to preserve its financial sustainability, via a comprehensive cost-saving exercise;

Other comments

31. Notes, with regard to the follow-up of last year's Court report, that the Agency has evaluated the effect of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the Union on human resources; notes that most of the affected staff acquired German citizenship or citizenship of another Member State before the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the Union and only six staff members still had only UK citizenship by the end of 2020; welcomes the fact that the Agency decided to allow the remaining staff with only UK citizenship to keep their positions, despite the loss of their Union citizenship;

32. Notes that, regarding the follow-up of last year's Court report, the Agency is streamlining its certification and standardisation activities following the launch of its Sustainable Aviation Programme in 2020 which can significantly contribute to the implementation of the European Green Deal; notes that in order to attain the European ambitions in sustainability and aviation, the Agency's priorities focus on supporting and fostering new greener technologies, facilitating decarbonisation of the aviation system, and promoting operational efficiency gains with a positive impact on environmental performance;
33. Takes note of the study published by the Agency in 2020 with an updated analysis on the 'Non-CO₂ climate impacts of aviation and potential policy measures pursuant to EU Emissions Trading System Directive Article 30(4)';
34. Welcomes the Agency's investments in video-conferencing facilities in an effort to reduce business travel and encourages the Agency to commit to a sustained use of those facilities in the long term;
35. Welcomes, with regard to the follow-up of last year's Court report, that the Agency has designated a disability coordinator, following the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, who will be responsible for the reviewing the accessibility of the Agency's website; calls on the Agency to report to the discharge authority on the developments in that regard;
36. Notes from the Agency's replies that the Agency has applied an improved social media strategy and redesigned its website to create an area that offers content for a non-specialist audience but calls on the Agency to make the information contained there available not only in English but in as many official languages as possible; notes that this practice allowed the Agency to inform the public about the measures being taken to ensure health safety in passenger travel during the COVID-19 pandemic;
37. Notes from the replies to the standard questionnaire that the Agency adopted a comprehensive Sustainable Aviation Programme in March 2020; notes that that programme includes an action on 'Sustainable EASA', which will drive the Agency's roadmap for monitoring and managing the Agency's environmental footprint; calls on the Agency to report to the discharge authority on the developments in that regard;
38. Calls on the Agency to continue to develop its synergies, increase cooperation and exchange of good practices with other Union agencies with a view to improving efficiency (human resources, building management, IT services and security, etc);
39. Recalls the importance of increasing the digitalisation of the Agency in terms of internal operation and management, but also in order to speed up the digitalisation of procedures; stresses the need for the Agency to continue to be proactive in that regard in order to avoid a digital gap between the agencies; draws attention, however, to the need to take all the necessary security measures to avoid any risk to the online security of the information processed;
40. Refers, for other observations of a cross-cutting nature accompanying its decision on discharge, to its resolution of 4 May 2022 ^(?) on the performance, financial management and control of the agencies.

^(?) Texts adopted, P9_TA(2022)0196.