

**RESOLUTION (EU) 2023/1875 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT****of 10 May 2023****with observations forming an integral part of the decision on discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Environment Agency (EEA) for the financial year 2021**

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT,

- having regard to its decision on discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Environment Agency for the financial year 2021,
  - having regard to Rule 100 of and Annex V to its Rules of Procedure,
  - having regard to the opinion of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety,
  - having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A9-0143/2023),
- A. whereas, according to its statement of revenue and expenditure <sup>(1)</sup>, the final budget of the European Environmental Agency (the 'Agency') for the financial year 2021 was EUR 64 867 177 representing a decrease of 27,64 % compared to 2020; whereas the Agency's budget derives mainly from the Union budget and the EFTA contribution (79,26 %) and the contributions under specific agreements (20,73 %), in particular for the Copernicus programme;
- B. whereas the Court of Auditors (the 'Court'), in its report on the annual accounts of the Agency for the financial year 2021 (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 appreciation that the budget monitoring efforts during the financial year 2021 resulted in a budget implementation rate of 100 % of the current year commitment appropriations, representing a slight increase of 0,04 % compared to 2020; notes that the current year payment appropriations execution rate was 84,90 %, representing a decrease of 1,18 % compared to the previous year;

**Performance**

2. Notes the Agency's achievements in the areas of biodiversity and ecosystems, climate change mitigation and adaptation, human health and the environment, circular economy and resource use, sustainability trends, prospects and responses, and, in particular, with regard to the specific objective to deliver assessments and indicators in support of Union sustainability ambitions; notes moreover that 2021 was the first year of implementation of the EEA-Eionet Strategy 2021–2030, which is aligned with the Union's policy priorities;
3. Stresses that the Agency provides sound, independent information on the environment; commends the quality of its outputs released in 2021, such as the launch of the MapMyTree tool, under the 3 billion trees commitment of the EU biodiversity strategy; the support to the negotiations on the European Climate Law and the establishment of the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change; and the launch of a new web portal to support noise reporting;
4. Notes that the Agency uses key performance indicators (KPIs) aimed at monitoring quantitatively the Agency's performance in relation to its operational work planning, delivery of the annual work programme and financial and human resource management, among others; notes, in particular, the 2021 delivery rate of 89 % achieved as regards key reports and assessments, which was slightly below target, and the budget execution rate of 95,2 % measured as a percentage of payments executed within the legal/contractual deadline; appreciates that the KPIs were fulfilled and the fact that the Agency has drawn attention to measures that can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Agency's work; however recommends that the Agency takes note of the indicators that have not yet been achieved or are lagging behind;

(1) OJ C 141, 29.3.2022, p. 12.

5. Notes that in 2021 the Agency maintained effective cooperation with Eionet, Union institutions, as well as global actors; notes with appreciation the key role the Agency has played in supporting environmental and climate actions implementing Union policies, the European Green Deal and the proposal for the Eighth Environment Action programme (the '8th EAP');
6. Recalls that, in 2021, the Agency undertook new tasks supporting the delivery of the Union's environment ambitions as part of the European Green Deal and the 8th EAP, also contributing to the Union's global commitments, thus strengthening the Agency's position as a major source for policy-relevant environmental information;

### **Staff policy**

7. Notes that, on 31 December 2021, the establishment plan was 99,28 % implemented, with 3 permanent officials and 136 temporary agents appointed out of 140 posts authorised under the Union budget (compared to 130 authorised posts in 2020); notes that, in addition, 79 contract agents and 18 seconded national experts worked for the Agency in 2021; is of the opinion that in order to properly perform the tasks on the Union's path to climate neutrality, a circular economy and nature restoration, the number of staff within the Agency should grow in the years to come; recalls that according to the Commission's proposal on a regulation on nature restoration, in order to monitor the goals of that future regulation alone, 12 additional posts will be needed; points out that policymakers rely on the expertise and support of the Agency in implementing the reforms required to achieve a climate-neutral future; calls therefore on the Agency and the Commission to carry out an evaluation of the possibilities in that regard and report back to the discharge authority; stresses that inadequate resources for the Agency may undermine the ability of the institutions to deliver on commitments in relation to the European Green Deal;
8. Notes with concern the lack of gender balance among the Agency's senior management members, with 6 out of 9 (67 %) being men; notes the gender balance within the Agency's management board, with 18 out of 38 (47 %) being men; notes the gender balance within the Agency's overall staff, with 112 out of 206 (54 %) being women; calls on the Agency to take concrete measures to increase gender balance at all levels of the Agency's hierarchy as soon as possible and report back to the discharge authority;
9. Notes, from the follow-up to the 2020 discharge report, that, in regard to staff policy, the Agency developed a multiannual human resources framework policy aligned to the EEA-Eionet Strategy 2021–2030 addressing five focus areas; notes moreover, that the Agency has a well-being coordinator;
10. Notes, from the follow-up to the 2020 discharge report that, concerning the legislation for sustainable finance, the Agency allocated one additional temporary agent to work on sustainable finance in 2021, and that this post has been planned to be valid only for three years in the financial fiche, and thereafter the Agency will not be in a position to continue these support tasks at the current level;
11. Notes that the Agency continues to report its assessment of resource needs to the Commission; further notes that after a discussion with the Commission, new legislation will cover support functions and that the Agency has stated that the additional support post in relation to the future Regulation on Nature Restoration Law will not be sufficient;
12. Notes with satisfaction that the Agency has a policy on protecting the dignity of the person and preventing psychological and sexual harassment supported by, inter alia, an e-learning course about ethics and integrity; notes that the Agency provides a confidential counsellor network and practical information on how to report alleged harassment and contact a confidential counsellor on its intranet;
13. Recalls the importance of developing a long term human resource policy on work-life balance, lifelong guidance and the offer of specific training possibilities for career development, gender balance at all staff levels, teleworking, the right to disconnect, the enhancement of a geographical balance to have appropriate representation from all Member States, and the recruitment and integration of people with disabilities as well as ensuring that they are treated equally and their opportunities are widely promoted;

**Procurement**

14. Notes that the Agency continues to actively pursue joint procurement procedures with the Commission by means of framework contracts, as well as to use a variety of Commission systems and services;
15. Notes from the Court's report that the Agency amended a framework service contract for the provision of repair and maintenance services by doubling the initial maximum budget from EUR 500 000 to EUR 1 000 000, and that the justification used was the derogation applicable to negotiated procedures without prior publication, for which the conditions were not met, and that, moreover, conditions of the Financial Regulation that allow contracts to be modified without a new procurement procedure were not met; notes with concern that the Court finds that the amendment was irregular; notes, moreover, that in 2021 there were no related payments;
16. Recalls the importance, for all procurement procedures, of ensuring there is fair competition between tenderers and of procuring goods and services at the best price, respecting the principles of transparency, proportionality, equal treatment and non-discrimination; requests that the e-procurement IT tools developed by the Commission be implemented; calls for an updated clarification of the procedures and templates in the procurement guidelines; notes with concern the Court's observation that public procurement weaknesses are increasing and remain the largest source of irregular payments for most of the Union agencies;

**Prevention and management of conflicts of interest, and transparency**

17. Acknowledges the Agency's existing measures and ongoing efforts to prevent and manage conflicts of interest, and to provide whistleblower protection; notes that there were no open, closed or ongoing whistleblowing cases in 2021; notes that there were no cases of conflict of interest reported in 2021;
18. Notes, from the follow-up to the 2020 discharge report, that the Agency continues to keep track of submitted CVs and declarations of interests and reminds management board members to submit theirs, on voluntary basis, in the event they have not been submitted yet;
19. Insists on the need to put in place more systematic rules on transparency, incompatibilities, conflicts of interest, illegal lobbying and revolving doors; calls on the Agency to strengthen its internal control mechanisms, including the setting up of an internal anticorruption mechanism;

**Internal control**

20. Acknowledges the structural change that followed the launch of the project 'Future workplace'; notes the preparation for the quality management system improvement project to remedy the weaknesses identified, such as only partial compliance in the framework components of the control environment, control activities and information and communication;
21. Notes with concern from the Court's report that a framework contract for the provision of canteen and catering services on the Agency's premises was extended on two separate occasions, that for the first extension the Agency did not file an exception note, which is not in line with the Agency's internal control standards that require that all deviations be documented, justified and approved; notes, furthermore, with concern that regarding the second extension the Agency drew up an exception note to the file, but did not file it in the central register of exceptions; notes the Agency's reply that the COVID-19 pandemic hindered the planning and the launch of a call for tenders for a new service framework contract; calls on the Agency to strengthen its internal control system in that regard;

22. Notes from the Court's report that in a service contract for the provision of the geographic information system support services, the Agency used a contract amendment to extend the performance of the services by one month, from 28 February 2021 to 31 March 2021; notes with concern that the amendment only entered into force on 22 March 2021, when signed by both contracting parties, effectively leaving a period of 22 days of service provision with no contract; notes that although the Agency had discovered this, it had not filled an exception note; notes the Agency's confirmation that the delay happened due to an oversight; welcomes the Agency's reply that it will reinforce its controls and procedures to lessen the risk of delays in entering into contract extensions and to ensure exception notes are filed where involuntary breaches of the Finance Regulation occur;
23. Notes from the Court's report that under a framework contract for the provision of IT services, the Agency paid ancillary services, under a separate work package, for an amount of EUR 25 000 without first verifying which exact profiles and daily rates the contractor had effectively applied when delivering and invoicing the services; notes from the Agency's reply that it has taken steps to address the Court's concerns for future orders;
24. Recalls the importance of strengthening management and control systems to ensure the proper functioning of the Agency; strongly insists on the need for effective management and control systems to avoid potential conflicts of interest, missing *ex ante/ex post* controls, inadequate management of budgetary and legal commitments, and failures to report issues in the register of exceptions;

### **Digitalisation and the green transition**

25. Notes with appreciation that the Agency has adopted the EEA-Eionet digitalisation framework in April 2021, undertaking a number of key activities such as the modernisation of the Agency data infrastructure and the start of projects exploring the use of artificial intelligence; welcomes the fact that the Agency launched several new digital and knowledge products in 2021, including the European Climate and Health Observatory and the European Climate Data Explorer within the Climate-ADAPT platform and interactive web reports on air quality and climate hazards;
26. Notes with regard to the Agency's IT network and the cybersecurity threat landscape, that the Agency has introduced 'Blue/green' networks in the offices, whereby a green network is a separation of the staff's laptops from all internal systems and a blue network is for the laptops that cannot yet be isolated and are restricted in terms of available software;
27. Notes the Agency's environmental management system and the Agency's commitment to becoming a 'climate-neutral' organisation; notes that the Agency commissioned a study in 2021 with the aim of identifying feasible actions to reduce the Agency's greenhouse gas emissions and help deliver climate neutrality by 2030;
28. 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 this regard in order to avoid a digital gap between the Union 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;
29. Encourages the Agency to work in close cooperation with the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and the Computer Emergency Response Team for the Union institutions, bodies and agencies (CERT-EU) and to carry out regular risk assessments of its IT infrastructure and to ensure regular audits and tests are carried out on its cyber defences; suggests that regularly updated cybersecurity-related training programmes be offered to all members of staff, including management, within the Agency; calls on the Agency to develop its cybersecurity policy more swiftly, deliver it before 31 December 2023 and report back to the discharge authority;

**Business continuity during the COVID-19 crisis**

30. Notes that the Agency, in response to the pandemic-related restrictions, introduced online recruitment, supported by the implementation of the recruitment platform Systal, which allowed the Agency to complete a large number of recruitments in 2020 and 2021 and leave a low vacancy rate at the end of each of those year;
31. Welcomes the fact that, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the work of the Agency continued to be efficient, flexible and carried out without unnecessary delays in 2021; encourages the Agency to put the lessons learned regarding remote and hybrid working methods into practice, in order to better organise what meetings and tasks could be carried out more efficiently if held remotely rather than in-person in the future;
32. Notes that in 2021 the Agency started to implement the cybersecurity baseline measures in anticipation of a regulation laying down measures on cybersecurity at the institutions, bodies, offices and agencies of the Union ('Cybersecurity Regulation'), as well as a zero-trust approach and multi-factor authentication for all internal services, and that IT administrative privileges were reviewed and restricted to the minimum;

**Other comments**

33. Notes that in 2021 the Agency kicked off a multi-annual, multi-component project to streamline its online presence in the coming years, to develop stronger web content policies across all of the Agency's platforms and to establish an improved navigation logic; notes that the new corporate website will be compliant with the WCAG 2.1 accessibility guidelines;
34. Recalls the importance of sufficiently informing the public about the risks of inaction as regards combating and adapting to climate change, welcomes the Agency's communication activities in this context, be it audiovisual content, online debates, the annual photo competition or local communication activities, and calls on the Agency to develop and, if possible, step up its activities in the upcoming period;
35. Notes that the Agency chaired the EU Agencies Network (EUAN) including most of its sub-networks, in line with the Union's priorities of digitalisation, green resilience and recovery, working amongst others on sustaining the green transition and contributing to the greening of the EUAN administration;
36. Calls on the Agency to continue to develop its synergies (for instance human resources, building management, IT services and security), and to reinforce its cooperation, its exchange of good practices and its discussions regarding areas of mutual interest with other Union agencies with a view to improving efficiency;
37. Refers, for other observations of a cross-cutting nature accompanying its decision on discharge, to its resolution of 10 May 2023 <sup>(2)</sup> on the performance, financial management and control of the agencies.

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<sup>(2)</sup> Texts adopted, P9\_TA(2023)0190.