RESOLUTION (EU) 2023/1840 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 general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2021, Section X – European External Action Service

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 X – European External Action Service,

— having regard to Rule 100 of and Annex V to its Rules of Procedure,

— having regard to the opinion of the Committee on Foreign Affairs,

— having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A9-0088/2023),

A. whereas the European External Action Service (EEAS) is responsible for the management of the administrative expenditure of its Headquarters (HQ) in Brussels and for the network of the 144 Union delegations and offices;

B. whereas the EEAS' responsibility has been extended to cover the administrative management of the Commission staff in the delegations through a series of Service Level Arrangements (SLAs);

C. whereas the role of the delegations is to represent the Union and its citizens around the world by building networks and partnerships, and to promote the values and interests of the Union;

D. whereas the peculiarity of the EEAS remains in its nature and origin, as it was when it was formed by the merging of staff belonging to the former external relation departments of the Council and of the Commission, into which diplomats from the Member States have been integrated;

E. whereas under the EEAS Internal Rules, the Secretary-General of the EEAS acts as authorising officer by delegation for the institution and the director-general for resource management has the role of principal sub-delegated authorising officer;

F. whereas the implementation of the budget is governed by the Financial Regulation and by the Internal Rules of implementation of the Budget of the EEAS;

1. Notes that the budget of the EEAS falls under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) heading 7, 'European public administration', which amounted to a total of EUR 10,7 billion in 2021; notes that the EEAS's budget (payments, including contributions from the Commission) represents around 9 % of the total administrative budget under MFF heading 7;

2. Notes that the European Court of Auditors (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 its work over many years indicates that overall this spending is low-risk; however, invites the Court to include in the next annual reports more comprehensive data regarding the completion of all requirements necessary for a consistent discharge procedure.

4. Notes that the Court mentions that it found two quantifiable errors in payments made by the EEAS, one concerned the absence of an underlying contract for services acquired by a Union Delegation, the other related to allowances paid to a member of staff who had not declared recent changes in their personal situation;

5. Notes with satisfaction that the Court also notes that it found no significant issues with the supervisory and control systems they examined at the EEAS;

6. Notes furthermore that, in 2015, the Court, found significant weaknesses related to procurement and recruitment procedures organised by Union Delegations; notes that, in 2021, the Court followed up on these observations by examining a sample of ten procurement procedures and eight local recruitment procedures organised by Union Delegations; notes that, in 2019, the EEAS made improvements to the procurement process through the simplification and modernisation of working procedures at Union Delegations, the centralisation of some processes at headquarters, the creation of new templates for procurement documentation and that it revised the rules and conditions governing the employment of local agents in Union Delegations, and performed ex ante controls before their recruitment; finally, notes with concern, that the Court in five of the ten procurement procedures examined found some deficiencies in how the Union Delegations applied public procurement rules and found some weaknesses in all eight of the recruitment procedures for local agents; calls on the EEAS to take action to resolve the problems leading to the procurement errors identified and to prevent future infringements of the relevant rules;

7. Strongly encourages the EEAS to take appropriate measures, such as enhancing training and improving guidelines and templates for procurement documentation, in order to reduce the number of errors when it comes to procurement and recruitment procedures organised by Union Delegations and to report to the discharge authorities about measures taken;

Budgetary and financial management

8. Notes that, in 2021, the budget for the EEAS was EUR 767 626 000, representing an increase of 5,0 % compared to 2020, which was similar to the increase of 5,2 % in 2020 compared to 2019; observes that, in addition to its own budget, the EEAS also disposed of an amount of EUR 211 200 000 (including assigned revenues and carried over amounts) from the Commission to cover the administrative costs of Commission staff working in Union delegations; notes that, as well as other amounts, the EEAS also received contributions to cover common costs of European Development Fund staff in Delegations, which brought the total budgetary amounts (commitment appropriations) managed by the EEAS to EUR 1 091,1 million;

9. Notes that, in 2021, 99,4 % of the final EEAS budget in commitments was executed, which is higher than in 2020 where 95,0 % was executed; notes that in payments 84,5 % of the budget for 2021 was executed, slightly higher than 2020, where 82,3 % was executed;

10. Notes that the final budget for the EEAS HQ, after transfers, amounted to EUR 295 million, out of which EUR 290,5 million equivalent to 98,5 %, was executed; notes that, in payments, EUR 238,3 million equivalent to 80,8 % was executed;

11. Notes that the final budget for EEAS delegations, after transfers, amounted to EUR 472,6 million out of which EUR 472,4 million equivalent to 99,9 % was executed; notes that, in payments, EUR 410,1 million equivalent to 86,8 % was executed;

12. Notes that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the budget for IT was increased during 2021, while the budget of various items including salaries was reduced; notes that the EEAS informed the budgeting authority about three transfers during 2021, out of which two were made to deal with the additional expenditure caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the end-of-year reconciliation;

13. Notes that the EEAS had 131 352 payments in 2021, out of which 115 060, equivalent to 87,6 % ,were paid within the time limit; notes furthermore that the average net payment time was 18 days and that the percentage of electronic invoicing was 24 %;

14. Notes with satisfaction that the EEAS has signed a significant number of Service Level Agreements primarily with the Commission but also with other institutions covering more than 70 different services provided by 16 entities; notes furthermore that the accountant of the Commission (the Directorate-general for Budget) still works as the accountant for the EEAS, but that the EEAS has increased its own capacity to handle some accounting functions and also the accounting functions of delegations;

15. Notes with satisfaction that the number of co-location agreements where Member States and other Union entities locate their staff in Union Delegations continues to rise, reaching 115 agreements in 67 Union Delegations with a total of 36 partners;

Internal management, performance and internal control

16. Notes that, in 2021, the EEAS implemented the largest reorganisation of its service since its creation in 2011, establishing six large geographical departments and an Office of the Secretary-General in order to better reflect the current geopolitical situation; notes that a new Directorate for Strategic Communication and Foresight was also created by merging two Strategic Communications Divisions and the Policy Planning and Strategic Foresight Division in order to better handle disinformation;

17. Notes that the EEAS' working conditions continued to be heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic during 2021; notes that, in particular, savings were made on salaries, due to slower recruitment procedures, and on missions, meetings, conferences etc.; notes that the pandemic also created possibilities for spreading disinformation and foreign manipulation and interference and therefore, added to the challenges of the EEAS;

18. Notes that, in 2021, the EEAS faced several security crises in Afghanistan, Sahel and Ethiopia, in which it was rather late to inform and react to the changes on the ground, leading to speedy evacuations of Union personnel;

19. Notes with satisfaction that no Union Delegations submitted reservations in 2021;

20. Notes that different aspects of the EEAS' work are being audited by its Internal Auditor, by the Commission's Internal Auditing Service and by the Court of Auditors; notes that while it is important to ensure thorough controls and audits it is equally important to avoid duplication;

21. Notes with satisfaction that the Commission's Internal Audit Service in their 'Annual report on internal audits carried out in 2021', concerning three earlier audits related to coordination between the Commission and the EEAS, concluded that all recommendations had been implemented;

22. Notes that the Internal Audit Division (IAD) of the EEAS, in its plan for the period 2018-2021, primarily focused on staff expenditure, which represents more than 50 % of EEAS spending; notes that the IAD plan for the period 2022-2024 will focus on other areas not previously covered, for example security, infrastructure and IT; calls on the EEAS to inform the discharge authority about the results of this internal audit;

23. Notes with satisfaction that all financial transactions of the EEAS budget recorded during budget year 2021 are controlled through random stratified samples using a methodology similar to the one used by the European Court of Auditors;

Human resources, equality and staff well-being

24. Notes that, at the end of 2021, there were 5 072 members of staff employed by the EEAS, out of which 2 303 (45,4 %) worked at the EEAS HQ and 2 769 (54,6 %) worked in Union Delegations and Offices around the world; notes that this represents a significant increase of 9,2 % from 4 643 members of staff in 2020, out of which 2 286 worked in the EEAS HQ and 2 357 worked in Delegations and offices; notes that most of the increases happened in Delegations and Offices where over 450 local agent posts were transferred from the Commission to the EEAS budget; notes finally that the EEAS received an additional 47 full-time equivalents in 2021 from the Budgetary Authority;

25. Notes that, at the end of 2021, the staff was made up of 1 706 officials and temporary agents, 1 543 local agents, 567 contract agents, 467 seconded national experts, 43 junior professionals in Union Delegations and 746 other external staff and trainees; notes finally that in addition there were 3 327 members of Commission staff employed in Union Delegations;

26. Notes that, in 2021, women represented 46,7 % of the EEAS staff, slightly down from 48,7 % at the end of 2020; notes however that women represented 37,4 % of AD positions, which is an increase from 37,3 % in 2020; notes with satisfaction that there has been a relative increase in the number of women in all management positions, with the number of women in middle management increasing from 32,7 % in 2020 to 35,4 % in 2021, and the number of women in senior management increasing from 25,5 % to 26,3 % and the number of women as head of delegation increasing from 27,1 % to 29,4 %; encourages the EEAS to lead by example in increasing the number of women as head of delegations and to engage in feminist diplomacy, especially in third countries with lower standards regarding gender equality, with the aim of promoting women's rights and inclusive governance;

27. Welcomes that the EEAS has appointed an Ambassador for Gender and Diversity to raise awareness and consideration in diplomacy, political dialogue and policy decisions; further welcomes that the EEAS, as part of the #NoWomanNoEUDiplomacy strategy, is opening up mentorship programmes for women in AST and lower AD grades in order to offer them a career path to more senior positions; calls on the EEAS to continue its focus on ensuring gender balance of staff and management and to report to the discharge authority about initiatives and progress in achieving this;

28. Calls for effective gender training strategies in the EEAS; highlights the importance of investing in resources and expertise towards developing training and education strategies focused on applying a gender equality approach to international policies and programmes in order to achieve a genuine change of culture within the EEAS; specifies that special attention should be devoted to integrating gender mainstreaming mechanisms, addressing gender budgeting, gender impact assessments and tackling gender-based violence; suggests that a comprehensive training programme be adopted for the adequate implementation of GAP III in all levels of the EEAS;

29. Notes with satisfaction that all Member States are represented in the staff and that especially the relative number of members of staff from the Member States that joined in 2004 or later (EU13) have increased and ensured a more reasonable distribution in the overall staff; however, stresses that high imbalances persist at management level despite repeated calls from the European Parliament to address this issue; is concerned, that only 24 Member States are represented among the EEAS Ambassadors and that the distribution is more unequal and that the five Member States with most ambassadors (France 19, Germany 18, Spain 17, Italy 16 and Belgium 12) have 82 out of 135 posts, equivalent to 61 %; underlines its concern about the geographical imbalance concerning the position of Heads of Delegation and reiterates its call for the EEAS to continue improving the geographical balance representation in order to have a proper representation of nationals from all Member States;

30. Underlines that EU13 Members States encompass around 23 % of the Union population; notes that the number of middle managers from EU13 Member States increased from 13,8 % in 2020 to 16,2 % in 2021, the number of senior managers from these countries increased from 7,3 % to 8,9 % and the number of ambassadors from these countries increased from 14,1 % in 2020 to 18 % in 2021; stresses that the EEAS, like all Union institutions, must ensure that all Member States are proportionally represented while at the same time respecting the competences and merits of the candidates; urges the EEAS to ensure the geographical balance in order to have an appropriate representation of nationals from all Member States, reflecting their diversity, as indicated in the Article 27 of the Staff Regulations of Officials; reiterates its call for the EEAS to carry on interacting with Member States to promote its posts among the national diplomat network and academia;

31. Notes with concern that, in 2021, 15 middle management and five senior management posts in the EEAS HQ and five middle management posts in Union Delegations were vacant for an average period of three months and that 15 staff members acted in management positions during the vacancies; encourages the EEAS to better promote its vacancies and career opportunities and to explore ways to improve the recruitment of personnel;

32. Notes that the EEAS has continued implementing the reform of conditions for local agents and that 62 % of local agents signed up for the reform, which together with new recruitments after 1 June 2020, implies that more than 66 % of local agents were covered by the new rules by 31 March 2022; calls on the EEAS to enhance training and guidance on the Union Delegations' recruitment procedures for local agents to ensure compliance with the principals of transparency and equal treatment;

33. Notes that EEAS staff are authorised to telework up to three days per week in the EEAS HQ and one day in Union Delegations; notes with satisfaction that the EEAS allows both staff at HQ and expatriate staff in Union Delegations to telework 10 days from outside the place of employment, which may be increased in specific situations in order to support of colleagues facing complex family situations;

34. Notes that, in 2021, the number of persons who were absent due to illness increased by 9,3 %, while the number of days of absence due to illnesses increased by 36 %; considers that this is a relatively large increase and calls on the EEAS to investigate further if there is anything that can be done in terms of improving physical and mental work conditions to ensure that the situation improves in the coming years; calls on the EEAS to take the necessary measures to mitigate the risk of burnout and to ensure the well-being of its staff;

35. Notes that the EEAS does not retain data on disabilities of staff but that in a survey addressed to all staff in the EEAS HQ and in Union Delegations, 24 out of 1 075 replies from members of staff declared a permanent disability, while 23 declared short term or temporary disability; notes furthermore that the EEAS has asked Union Delegations to provide information on the suitability and accessibility of premises and the city where it is located, which must be seen as a first step towards also being able to send staff with disabilities to Delegations; calls on the EEAS to continue to report on progress made towards integrating people with disabilities in the service;

36. Welcomes the different EEAS secondment and exchange programmes with Member States, third countries, international organisations, and Union institutions, including the European Parliament; especially welcomes that due to the improvement of the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was possible to resume the programme between the EEAS and Parliament from November 2021;

37. Welcomes that the EEAS takes a relatively large number of trainees both in the HQ and in Union Delegations, 461 trainees in total, and thereby gives many young people the opportunity to experience working in an Union institution; notes furthermore that all trainees in the HQ are being given a monthly grant, while most trainees in Delegations (96 %) were paid by the EEAS or other institutions; calls on the EEAS to take the appropriate steps to ensure that all its trainees receive a decent remuneration;

38. Encourages the continuation of efforts to rejuvenate the core EEAS staff and grow a permanent, specialised European Diplomatic Corps through regular specialised open competitions, aiming to recruit individuals with a diversity of talent, skills and potential;

Ethical framework and transparency

39. Notes that adhering to rules and norms concerning ethical behaviour and transparency is essential for all public institutions and even more so for the EEAS as it represents Union values around the world in its 144 Delegations and Offices; welcomes therefore that the EEAS has recently adopted the 'Principles of professional behaviour'; encourages the EEAS to organise systematic training and awareness sessions in the area of proper conduct for all its staff;

40. Notes that the EEAS is offering training courses in ethics in the framework of Newcomers Welcome Sessions and as part of pre-posting seminars for Union Ambassadors; notes furthermore with satisfaction that all Union appointed managers are obliged to follow a course on 'Creating a harassment-free working environment'; encourages the EEAS to also offer a general course on ethics as part of mandatory preparations for postings at Union Delegations and Offices;

41. Notes that during 2021, five cases involving EEAS staff were investigated by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), out of which four were closed without recommendations and one was closed with recommendations; asks the EEAS to provide information on the implementation of these recommendations to the discharge authority;

42. Notes that, during 2021, the EEAS had no communication with the EPPO but that the EEAS is ready to cooperate and that an initiative for a possible Memorandum of Understanding between the two services lies with the EPPO; notes that close cooperation with both OLAF and the EPPO are important in a general anti-fraud strategy;

43. Welcomes that the EEAS is in the process of updating its anti-fraud strategy following the 2021 methodology and guidance issued by OLAF on anti-fraud strategies; welcomes that the EEAS plans to ensure that awareness training courses will target all categories of staff; encourages the EEAS to make such training courses mandatory at least to all staff that will be posted abroad; asks the EEAS to inform the discharge authority about the new strategy when it has been finalised, including information about its dissemination to staff;

44. Notes that the EEAS received 16 requests from the European Ombudsman out of which 13 cases concluded that no maladministration occurred, while maladministration was detected in one case and two cases are still open; notes with satisfaction that the EEAS is committed to following up on the recommendations from the Ombudsman in the two cases in which the Ombudsman has issued such recommendations;

45. Calls on the EEAS to monitor the positions of former senior staff and heads of delegations, given their sensitive political role; invites the EEAS to systematically review potentially problematic transitions to the private sector or to third country organisations and to continue monitoring the occupation of former senior officials until the end of the mandatory cooling-off period, as unaddressed conflicts of interest situations may compromise the enforcement of high ethical standards throughout the Union administration;

46. Notes with satisfaction that a number of situations where staff of missions declared conflicts of interest were handled by relieving the persons in question from performing certain tasks; notes with satisfaction that the EEAS applied the cooling-off period for three retired officials from professional contacts with former colleagues and that the EEAS did not receive any complaint about breaches of this cooling-off period;

47. Calls on the EEAS to ban all officials who have left the service from lobbying and advocacy for the duration of the cooling-off period;

48. Urges the EEAS to follow-up without further delay on their announcement to adopt and implement its self-standing implementation provisions on outside activities and assignments, which create a sui generis legal basis for Heads of Delegations to better protect the image and reputation of the Union as a whole;

49. Notes that the EEAS does not have a direct role in Union legislation, however, it has an important role regarding decisions concerning sanctions and the negotiation of international trade agreements, which have a considerable regulatory impact; would therefore find it extremely relevant for the EEAS to join the Union Transparency Register on the basis of a service-level agreement; invites the EEAS to publish all meetings with all types of lobby organisations, including those of Heads of Union Delegations, in order to improve transparency;

50. Notes with satisfaction that there were no cases of whistleblowing reported in 2021 and that the EEAS applies the Commission's guidelines on whistleblowing and makes them available on the EEAS intranet;

51. Calls for an end to the use of external companies that, according to Yale University's ranking ([1]), continue to operate in Russia;

Digitalisation, cybersecurity and data protection

52. Notes that compared to 2020, investment in IT projects and equipment decreased by 6,4 % to EUR 22 290 743, while investment for security increased by 24,6 % to EUR 5 778 000;

53. Welcomes that the EEAS has continued upgrading and renewing technical equipment during 2021 through for instance doubling the network bandwidth to improve teleworking experiences and installing more than 500 new videoconferencing facilities in the HQ and in Union Delegations; further welcomes that the EEAS fully digitalised its human resources, administrative and financial workflows, increasing organisational efficiency;

54. Notes that it is becoming more and more important to take cybersecurity into account and welcomes that the EEAS has distributed a new Union restricted system throughout the EEAS to ensure secure communication at the Union restricted classification level and that measures have been taken to ensure that European Commissioners and others have the ability to enable classified calls; welcomes that the EEAS keeps highly classified information in secure systems that are fully isolated from other networks and the internet;

55. Notes with concern that, in 2021, the Security Incident and Event Monitoring (SIEM) solution of the EEAS generated more than 16 000 cyber alerts, which resulted in the identification of 236 real cyberattacks that did not all succeed in data breaches; calls on the EEAS to continue to have a strong focus on cybersecurity and hybrid threats, especially those that are sponsored by foreign states, and work together with other Union Institutions and Member States in order to identify such threats and protect Union infrastructure as much as possible; underlines that cyber awareness and a systematic training programme for all staff, including management, are key elements in an effective cyber security framework;

56. Notes with satisfaction that the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) conducted three inspections concerning the EEAS in 2021 and that all inspections are considered closed without additional observations;

57. Welcomes that the EEAS has adopted a hosting strategy, which ensures that the core business content remains on premises and its data is on servers that are directly owned and controlled by the EEAS; continues to call on the EEAS to ensure that Union data, to the largest extend possible, are only stored in EU/EEA facilities; furthermore welcomes that the EEAS continues to ensure that information and communication relating to the processing of personal data is easy to understand and in full conformity with Union legislation;

([1]) https://som.yale.edu/story/2022/over-1000-companies-have-curtailed-operations-russia-some-remain

58. Notes that the EEAS is assessing open source solutions on an equal footing with proprietary source solutions and is using a series of open source products for developers, hosting solutions, application servers, and identify and access management;

59. Notes with satisfaction that the EEAS has adopted a hosting policy and maintains a central repository of all information systems and technical services related to business applications and services; further notes that for information systems hosted on premises, both the system and its data are on servers that are directly owned and controlled by the EEAS and that the Data Protection Officer ensures the sound data protection controls in place;

Buildings

60. Notes that the EEAS has a very large and complex building stock comprising the buildings at the HQ in Brussels, approximately 180 office buildings and 150 residences of Union Ambassadors around the world; agrees that in Brussels and in most countries in the world where the Union can foresee maintaining representation there will probably, in the long run, constitute a saving from owning the buildings instead of renting;

61. Welcomes that the EEAS has started to adapt office spaces to new ways of working in order to create attractive working environments and ensure the most environmentally efficient use of its buildings; at the same time asks that such developments are implemented in close cooperation with staff;

62. Highly welcomes that the EEAS supports the goal of climate neutrality and that the EEAS is giving priority to buildings with an environmental certification; encourages the EEAS to also implement energy saving measures in the existing building stock; welcomes that the EEAS has already installed a photovoltaic installation of 355 m^2 on its roof at the HQ and in 18 Union Delegations and encourages the EEAS to expand its investment in solar panels throughout the world; asks the EEAS to make a cost-benefit analysis especially of the system installed at the building in Brussels with a view to sharing this with other Union Institutions which have so far not installed such systems;

63. Notes that the EEAS continues to ensure a high focus on security both at HQ and in Union Delegations and Offices; given the existing geopolitical situation, also welcomes that work on preventing espionage threats has been intensified; fully supports the EEAS in increasing its safety measures in order to protect both staff and physical and digital infrastructure from threats and attacks;

Environment and sustainability

64. Highly welcomes that the EEAS has set up an Environmental Management System (EMS) covering areas like energy savings, mobility of staff, CO_2 emission caps for service cars, information technology, green procurement and recycling and waste sorting etc., to be gradually improved;

65. Notes that the EEAS has adopted and implemented initiatives to support sustainable mobility of its staff and has set goals for 2023 for around 80 % of staff to use eco-friendly means of transportation; calls on the EEAS to report to the discharge authority regarding the progress made towards reaching these goals;

66. Welcomes that, in March 2021, the EEAS initiated the collection of environmental data from Union Delegations relating to energy and water consumption, waste generation, commuting, green tenders and consumption of materials such as paper and fuel etc.; encourages the EEAS to continue and extend this initiative to all Delegations and facilitate the exchange of best practises among Delegations;

67. Welcomes that the EEAS participates in the Interinstitutional helpdesk for Green Public Procurements and that support concerning environmental criteria for procurement documents are given to Union Delegations; encourages that such criteria is gradually shared among all Union Delegations and asks the EEAS to report to the discharge authority about progress made in this area;

Interinstitutional cooperation

68. Welcomes that agreements have been reached between the EEAS and the Commission concerning the exchange of restricted level documents and that a dedicated Service Level Agreement has been agreed between the EEAS and both the General Secretariat of the Council and the Commission on the provision of highly classified secure voice and messaging systems, which are increasingly important given the geopolitical context;

69. Welcomes that the EEAS concluded and signed an Establishment Agreement for the Union Delegation in the United Kingdom;

70. Welcomes that the EEAS declares that it has a good cooperation with OLAF and the European Court of Auditors (ECA) based on mutual trust, with regular meetings at various working levels with the aim of preventing fraud, investigation and ongoing auditing work and implementation of recommendations; strongly encourages the EEAS to develop the same kind of trust and cooperation with the EPPO;

Communication

71. Notes that the EEAS budget for strategic communication and public diplomacy activities in 2021 amounted to more than EUR 26,17 million supporting communication activities in the HQ and in all the Union Delegations;

72. Welcomes that priorities in communication are given to areas like Union values and interests, response to the international health crises and climate action and that Union Delegations have focussed on thematic days like Europe Day, Pride Parades, Women's Day, Climate Diplomacy Week etc.;

73. Encourages the EEAS to engage with the European Data Protection Supervisor with a view to utilising the two open-source social media platforms, EU-Voice and EU-Video, that were launched as a public pilot project to promote the use of free and open source social networks;

74. Highlights that the EEAS works closely with independent media and civil society partners in the Eastern Partnership region to build their capacity to counter foreign information manipulation and interference threats; welcomes that the EEAS works hand in hand with Ukraine to support its strategic communication efforts in the face of Russia's unprovoked military aggression to ensure that Russia's manipulation of information is exposed and countered;

75. Calls on the EEAS to strengthen the Union Delegations in the Eastern Partnership countries; underlines the need to assist the Eastern Partnership countries that are suffering from Russia's military aggression on Ukraine and to communicate Union policies more effectively to their citizens;

76. Highly welcomes that the EEAS has invested significantly in strengthening and building resilience to counter disinformation and foreign interference in Union affairs, including through a reorganisation of the Strategic Communications Division in 2021, by increasing the teams focussing on China, recruiting 27 Strategic Communication Officers based at Union Delegations and setting up Information Sharing and Analysis Centres across the Union in order to enable the EEAS to better tackle information manipulation and interference; stresses that the EEAS is the main Union institution responsible for countering foreign interference;

77. Calls again on the EEAS to strengthen the role of the Union Delegations in third countries in order to reinforce their ability to debunk disinformation campaigns threatening democratic values orchestrated by foreign state actors; calls, furthermore, on the EEAS to strengthen the Union Delegations' engagement in our neighbourhood and the Western Balkan countries in order to support communication policy on the European perspective that is more active and effective and provide the best possible assistance to the countries engaged in pro-democratic and pro-European reforms; calls on Union Delegations to continue their coordinated efforts to increase the visibility of Union-funded projects.

78. Notes with concern the statement of the High Representative during the EU Ambassadors Annual Conference 2022, when he stated that reports from Union delegations came too late and that he was better informed from media outlets; calls on the EEAS to report to the discharge authority on the shortcomings that have been identified and the measures to be taken in order tackle those shortcomings.

79. Encourages Union delegations to promote and engage with local actors, civil society organisations and social partners in third countries to stimulate social dialogue and dialogue about rule of law, fundamental rights and fight against corruption; asks the Union delegations to closely monitor the state of democracy in the different countries and to provide logistical and technological support to human rights and indigenous peoples defenders, in particular women; calls on Union delegations to continue their coordinated efforts to increase the visibility of Union-funded projects, especially in candidate countries.