2024/2248

10.10.2024

RESOLUTION (EU) 2024/2248 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

of 11 April 2024

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 2022, 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 2022, 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 (A9-0102/2024),

A. 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 performance-based budgeting and good governance of human resources;

B. 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;

C. 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);

D. 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 of the Union;

E. 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;

F. 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;

G. 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 MFF heading 7, 'European public administration', which amounted to EUR 11,6 billion in 2022 (representing 5,9 % of the total Union budget); notes that the EEAS's budget of approximately EUR 1,1 billion represents around 9,4 % of the total administrative expenditure;

2. Notes that the Court of Auditors (the 'Court'), in its Annual Report for the financial year 2022 examined a sample of 60 transactions under Administration, the same number as were examined in 2021; further notes that the Court writes that administrative expenditure comprises expenditure on human resources including pensions, which in 2022 accounted for about 70 % of the total administrative expenditure, and expenditure on buildings, equipment, energy, communications and information technology and that its work over many years indicates that, overall, this spending is low risk;

3. Notes that 14 (23 %) of the 60 transactions contained errors but that the Court, based on the five errors which were quantified, estimate the level of error to be below the materiality threshold;

4. Regrets that the Court in its Annual Report for the financial year 2022 observes that they found two quantifiable errors in the payments made by the EEAS, one concerned the absence of a valid underlying contract for security services acquired by a Union Delegation, the other related to child allowances received by a staff member from other sources but not deducted from their pay;

Budgetary and financial management

5. Notes that the budget for 2022 for the EEAS was EUR 786 947 220, representing an increase of 2,5 % from 2021, which is less than the 5,0 % increase from 2020 to 2021; observes that, in addition to its own budget, the EEAS also used EUR 241,4 million (including assigned revenues and carried over amounts) from the Commission to cover the administrative costs of Commission staff working in Union Delegations; notes that this amounted to an increase of 14,3 % from 2021; notes that the EEAS also received additional contributions to cover common costs of European Development Fund staff in Delegations and other amounts bringing the total available budget for the EEAS (in commitment appropriations) to EUR 1 143,6 million, which represents an increase of 4,8 % from 2020; regrets that the EEAS administrative budget for 2022 was underbudgeted despite the important role of the institution for the early 2022 broader international context and the increased costs that implied;

6. Notes that, in 2022, 99,99 % of the final EEAS budget in commitments was executed, which was even higher that in 2021 where 99,37 % was executed and significantly higher than in 2020 where 95,01 % was executed; notes furthermore that 90,56 % of the budget for payments was executed in 2022, which is a significant increase compared to an execution rate of 84,47 % in 2021 and 82,34 % in 2020;

7. Notes that the final budget for the EEAS HQ after transfers amounted to EUR 308,1 million in 2022, which represents an increase of 4,4 % from 2021; notes that 100 % of the budget in commitments was executed; notes that in payments EUR 269,2 million, equal to 87,4 % of the budget, was executed, which represents an increase of EUR 30,9 million from 2021 where 80,8 % of payments were executed;

8. Notes that the final budget for the EEAS delegations after transfers amounted to EUR 478,9 million in 2022, which represents an increase of 1,3 % from 2021; notes that 100 % of the budget in commitments was executed; notes that in payments EUR 443,4 million, equal to 92,6 % of the budget, was executed, which represents an absolute increase of EUR 33,3 million from 2021 where 86,8 % of payments were executed;

9. Notes that the EEAS executed 20 budgetary transfers in accordance with Article 29 of the Financial Regulation out of which three involved information on the budgetary authority; notes that the total amount subject to transfers was EUR 38,2 million, increasing the budget of EEAS Delegations by EUR 0,9 million and decreasing the EEAS HQ staff budget by EUR 0,5 million and EEAS HQ Buildings and equipment budget by EUR 0,4 million;

10. Notes with concern that the EEAS reports that the 2022 budget was especially challenging due to new tasks and increasing running costs and that mitigating measures included reducing or cancelling all non-essential expenditure in Delegations, that publication of posts in HQ and Delegations were carefully considered and several were frozen for a period, non-compulsory salary updates and post upgrades were paused or postponed to the extent possible and recovery of claims towards third parties were accelerated where possible;

11. Notes that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine created budgetary pressures for the EEAS, including through rising inflation and salary adjustments, strongly increasing energy costs and other contractor's costs for a number of goods and services; Stresses the importance of establishing a robust and secure financial foundation for the EEAS, emphasising its pivotal role in effectively executing the Union's common security and foreign policy;

12. Regrets that budgetary pressure continued in 2023 and led the EEAS to decide against sending any staff on any of the planned follow-up missions to the Electoral Observation Missions due to a shortage in the travel budget for a large part of 2023; considers that the EEAS should be given the necessary resources in order to ensure a proper follow-up to these important missions;

13. Notes with satisfaction that the total number of co-locations with Member States and other EU partners in Union Delegations increased from 122 in 2021 to 135 in 2022; welcomes that the EEAS Secretary-General adopted a Decision on co-location policy, which provides a comprehensive and transparent structural framework harmonising the EEAS co-location practice by setting common principles and objectives;

14. Notes that the total paid mission costs for the EEAS was EUR 24,065 million in 2022, which represents a significant increase from EUR 6,128 million in 2021 but which is more comparable with the pre-COVID-19 level in 2019 when the paid amount was EUR 20,972 million; notes furthermore that the EEAS does not have a separate budget line for missions and travel for the High Representative / Vice President and that the missions and travel costs for the HR/VP are shared between the EEAS and the Commission depending on the purpose of the mission; notes finally, that for 2022, the EEAS had costs of EUR 3 502,73 on 6 missions for the High Representative / Vice President and air-taxi costs of EUR 178 320,76; asks the EEAS to inform Parliament about how many times the High Representative / Vice President travelled with commercial planes and how many times charter planes were used;

15. Notes the extensive use of private leased jets for official trips by the HR/VP and understands that travelling is inherent and essential to the mandate as High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, which includes representing the Union in high-level meetings, conferences and summits worldwide; believes that transparency of work-related activities and sound financial management when using the Union's public funds should be at the core of the Union institutions; further believes that members of the Union's institutions should act as an example for the public with regard to following climate policies in line with the flagship European 'Green Deal';

16. Recalls the answer received following CONT Member's written question regarding the details of HR/VP's travels by air-taxis; regrets that aside from mentioning routes travelled, the EEAS failed to specify the amounts spent on those travels and indicate which trips and what amounts were covered by the EEAS and the Commission's budgets respectively; stresses the importance of this information being made available to the discharge authority; notes also the fact that the air-taxi costs increased from EUR 0 in 2021 to EUR 178 320,76 in 2022, which is naturally explained by the COVID-19 pandemic; recommends that air-taxis only be used when there are no suitable commercial options or when there are security concerns;

Internal management, performance and internal control

17. Notes that during 2022 the exceptional measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic were phased out and the institutions started to resume functioning normally, while the EEAS was affected by the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine as well as security crises in Afghanistan, Haiti and Sahel; also notes that three Union Delegations were marked as Level 3 on the evacuation level, meaning only essential staff were allowed to stay in the country of posting, Ukraine (since February 2022), Haiti (since June 2022) and Burkina Faso (since December 2022);

18. Notes that the EEAS Secretary-General issued an instruction note to Heads of Union Delegations, requesting them notably to report in a timely way during crises ('more regular, direct and systematic reporting'); finds it concerning that the EEAS ambassadors were rather late to inform and react to the changes on the ground, especially in Ukraine and Afghanistan, leading to hasty evacuations of Union personnel; believes that the EEAS should review its risk management methodology, which is used to evaluate the security situation for members of staff in Union Delegations;

19. Welcomes that as a response to the different crises during the last couple of years, the EEAS created the Crisis Response Centre in July 2022, which liaises with external partners like the Union institutions and Member States and brings diplomatic, security and intelligence capabilities together internally;

20. Notes that the Directorate-General for Resource Management, which will continue to handle the administrative aspects of all crisis, was restructured into two directorates and the number of Divisions was reduced from 16 to 13 by grouping similar and related functions together and the coordination team attached to the Director-General was strengthened;

21. Notes that, in 2021, the EEAS created an Internal Control Committee, which has since met twice per year, in order to allow senior managers to discuss mitigating measures devised to address weaknesses identified in internal controls;

22. Notes with satisfaction that no Union Delegations submitted reservations in 2022;

23. Notes that different elements of the EEAS budget are being audited by its Internal Auditor, the Commission's Internal Auditing Service and by the Court of Auditors; notes with surprise that the EEAS did not launch any internal audits in 2022, but that two audits were finalised in 2022 and that three audits were still ongoing; stresses the importance of conducting internal audits diligently and regularly especially after the EEAS had introduced a new methodology to its internal auditing system in 2021;

24. Notes that four critical recommendations from the Internal Audit Service remained open in 2022; welcomes that the recommendation concerning the security at the Union Delegation in Mali is being closely monitored; regrets that the recommendations concerning the management of the Union Delegation in Washington remains open and that the creation of a Limited Liability Company (LLC) has created complex legal issues; asks that Parliament is kept updated about the development of the situation concerning that LLC;

25. Notes that the EEAS Inspection Services issued 5 critical recommendations during 2022 and appreciates that three have been fully implemented or resolved while the last two are being followed closely; asks the EEAS to provide further information in the follow-up to the discharge report;

26. Underlines that last year's focus on procurement and recruitment procedures organised by Union Delegations due to the findings by the Court continues to be a cause for concern; notes that the EEAS has argued for several changes to the Financial Regulation to take account of the special situation of Union Delegations in third countries; stresses that while certain flexibility might be justifiable, the differences between deadlines and rules for each of the host country might lead to further errors and inconsistencies in procurement procedures; nevertheless, and taking the final outcome of the negotiations on the Financial Regulation into account, calls on the EEAS to adopt necessary measures to ensure that the number of errors by Union delegations is reduced and report to Parliament about measures adopted;

27. Notes that the Union delegation to the UK opened on 1 February 2020 in the office space previously occupied by the Representation of the Commission and the European Parliament Liaison Office (EPLO); notes with appreciation that, after the signing of a Service Level Agreement between the EEAS and the Parliament, the same rights and obligations will apply to Parliament staff posted in London as the rights and obligations arising from the Establishment Agreement for Delegation Staff, and that the Union Delegation in London notifies Parliament staff to the UK authorities in accordance with the Service Level Agreement;

Human resources, equality and staff well-being

28. Notes that, by the end of 2022, there were 5 188 people employed by the EEAS, out of which 2 419 (46,6 %) were posted at the EEAS HQ and 2 769 (53,4 %) worked in Union Delegations and Offices, which represents an increase of 2,3 % from 5 072 people working in the EEAS at the end of 2021 with 2 303 at the HQ and 2 769 in Delegations and Offices; notes that the increase of 116 members of staff were all employed at the EEAS HQ; finally notes that, for 2022, the EEAS received an additional 32 full-time equivalents from the Budgetary Authority and that four posts (three AD and one AST) were transferred to the Commission as part of the administrative budget;

29. Notes that, at the end of 2022, the staff was made up of 1 247 officials, 468 temporary agents, 596 contract agents, 491 seconded national experts, 1 573 local agents, 144 trainees, 39 junior professionals in Delegations and 630 external, interim and other staff; notes finally that, in addition, there were 3 316 members of Commission staff employed in Union Delegations;

30. Notes that, at the end of 2022, that out of 1 715 officials and temporary agents, 881 (51,4 %) were men and 834 (48,6 %) were women, which represents a slight increase from 2021 when 48,1 % of staff were women; notes that among contract agents 55,9 % were women, slightly down from 57,7 % in 2021 while among seconded national experts 25,1 % were women, which represents an increase from 22,2 % in 2021; however, notes that women are notably underrepresented in senior positions such as AD 9-12 and AD 13-16, while they are overrepresented mainly in AST positions;

31. Notes with concern that for senior management in HQ and Delegations, there were 18 women (29,0 %) and 44 men (71,0 %) at the end of 2022, representing a slight increase in the relative share of women from 26,8 % in 2021; welcomes that for HQ, the share of women in senior management positions increased from 25,0 % in 2021 to 30,6 % in 2022;

32. Notes that for middle management in HQ and Delegations, there were 86 (38,4 %) women and 138 (61,6 %) men in middle management positions at the end of 2022; notes that this represents an increase in the share of women in those from 34,2 %, but that the share of women is still unsatisfactorily low; further welcomes that for HQ, the share of women in middle management positions increased from 40,7 % in 2021 to 44,4 % in 2022;

33. Calls on the EEAS to persist in taking action to achieve more discernible gender balance within its organisation at all levels;

34. Welcomes that the Commission and the HR/VP, in response to the calls from Parliament, has adopted a Gender Action Plan for 2021-2025 as a cross-cutting measure for all aspects of foreign policy as a first step towards a genuine feminist diplomacy; welcomes that the EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity continues to promote the Union policy framework on Women, Peace and Security and to ensure the participation of women in all diplomatic and political dialogues and welcomes the launch of the EU Women Diplomats Network between Member States and the EEAS to promote Union values on diversity and equality and to support gender equality in the rest of the world;

35. Stresses that the GAP III dictates that by 2025 85 % of new EU actions must contribute to gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment, while the EEAS must accelerate the progress towards the goals of GAP III by focusing meaningfully on its everyday work on the GAP III's key areas of engagement, including ending gender-based violence, promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights, economic and social rights and empowerment, equal participation and leadership;

36. Expresses concern about the global status of LGBTIQ+ rights and the growing resistance to women's rights, gender equality, and sexual and reproductive health and rights in developing countries; calls on the Commission and the EEAS to address setbacks in recognising and protecting these rights; emphasises the need to prioritise targeted support for civil society organisations (CSOs) and communities advocating for sexual and reproductive health and rights, women's rights, gender equality, the LGBTIQ+ community and other marginalised groups, including enhanced measures to decriminalise homosexuality; recalls that a minimum of 85 % of new actions under the NDICI-GE instrument should prioritise gender equality, with at least 5 % specifically dedicated to women's and girls' rights and empowerment;

37. Welcomes that all Member States are represented in the members of staff of the EEAS; notes however that significant imbalances still persist with 25 Member States represented in all staff categories, while there were only two nationals from Luxembourg (1 CA and 1 SNE), and Malta did not have any nationals in the Contract Agent category; notes that Belgium is the most overrepresented Member State making up 12,7 % of staff employed by the EEAS, including 15,4 % of the officials; notes that out of 141 Union Ambassadors, three Member States do not have any (Hungary, Luxembourg and Malta) and Cyprus and Slovenia have just one national each, notably one less than in 2021, whereas the Member States with most Ambassadors are France with 20, Spain with 18, Italy with 17, Germany with 14 and Belgium with 11, implying that these five countries have 80 out of the 141 posts, which is equal to 57 %; notes with satisfaction that this is a reduction compared to last year, when the same five countries had 61 % of the Ambassador posts; regrets, however, that the amount of Ambassador posts held by Member States that joined in 2004 or later (EU-13) decreased to 17 % in 2022, compared to 18 % in 2021; calls on the EEAS to publish, annually, a gender and nationality breakdown of middle and senior management positions; reiterates its concern about the geographical imbalance concerning the position of Heads of delegation and calls for the EEAS to continue improving the geographical balance in order to have a proper representation of nationals from all Member States reflecting their diversity, while at the same time respecting the competences and merits of the candidates;

38. Welcomes that the EEAS promotes a flexible, digital and trust-based work environment to enhance efficiency, protect the health and wellbeing of staff, and improve work-life balance; notes that the teleworking rules at the EEAS in 2022 meant that staff in HQ were authorised to telework up to three days per week, while staff in Delegations were authorised to telework one day per week; notes furthermore that new rules on teleworking entered into force in October 2023 and that transitional measures included the authorisation of 10 days of teleworking from outside the place of employment for both staff in HQ and in Delegations, which on a case-by-case basis can be extended for staff with complex family situations; asks the EEAS to keep Parliament informed about the new teleworking rules and how they are assessed by both staff and management;

39. Notes with regret that the number of staff on long-term sick leave for more than 50 days increased from 91 staff members in 2021 to 111 staff members in 2022, equivalent to an increase of 22 %; notes at the same time that the EEAS has several initiatives in place to ensure support and to educate staff about strategies to avoid burnout, including tasking managers with the responsibility of ensuring that the task allocation is reasonable and that, in the event of burnout, guidance and special working time arrangements are put in place to facilitate the return to work; calls on the EEAS to further consider how long-term sickness, including burnout, can be prevented as much as possible, and to take the necessary measures to ensure the wellbeing of its staff;

40. Welcomes that, during 2022, the EEAS intensified its efforts and launched a number of initiatives to raise awareness about harassment, including an 'Anti-Harassment Awareness Week' in October 2022 and the adoption of new 'Principles of professional behaviour in the EEAS'; notes that, during 2022, two requests for assistance in relation to harassment were submitted, with one being closed in 2022 and the other being closed in 2023, both without sanctions; notes that a further three requests from 2021 and one from 2020 were closed during 2022 and 2023; notes furthermore, that the demand for EEAS mediation services increased during 2022, reaching 218 mediation cases and 19 cases of confidential counselling; asks that Parliament is kept informed about the development in the number of harassment cases and if sanctions are imposed in any of them;

41. Notes that the EEAS does not know the exact number of members of staff with disabilities but that the replies in an anonymous survey from 2021 indicated that 24 of 1 075 respondents declared a disability and 23 declared a short-term or temporary disability; welcomes that the Union Delegations have produced 'accessibility factsheets' providing information on the suitability and accessibility of the Delegation premises in order to ensure that staff with disabilities have relevant information before applying for a posting;

42. Welcomes that the EEAS continues to employ a relatively large number of trainees, offering 63 Blue Book traineeships, four short-term traineeships at HQ and 365 traineeships in 102 Delegations; notes that one short-term traineeship at HQ and 22 traineeships in Delegations were not funded and were carried out by students that were required to complete a traineeship as part of their studies in exchange for academic credits; welcomes that similar to staff, the trainees benefitted from hybrid working arrangements in line with guidelines issued by Director-General for Resource Management; reiterates its call on all institutions to make sure that all trainees receive a reasonable remuneration from the institution;

43. Calls for the establishment of a permanent structure and the necessary resources for the European Diplomatic Academy, which can contribute to fully developing an autonomous EU diplomacy with a common diplomatic based on an EU perspective; considers that in the future this Academy should include a system of selection, recruitment and training of Europeans who have completed higher education and are not diplomats of Member States; stresses the need to explore and decide on ways of access to the EEAS for those graduating from this Academy;

Ethical framework and transparency

44. Welcomes that the EEAS continues to provide ethics training in the framework of the Newcomer Welcome Sessions and the pre-posting seminars for Union Ambassadors and Heads of Administration; asks the EEAS to provide mandatory training sessions to ensure that all members of staff are reminded of important principles such as ethics, transparency, conflicts of interest and anti-fraud;

45. Regrets that a limited number of fraud-related cases involving misappropriation of Union funds by members of staff at Union Delegation were investigated by OLAF during 2022 and that some are still ongoing; underlines that OLAF needs to conclude its investigations before conclusions can be drawn, but at the same time encourages the EEAS to take all necessary steps to swiftly follow-up on possible criticism from OLAF;

46. Notes that, in 2022, the EEAS handled 16 requests from the Ombudsman, out of which 11 cases concerned administrative procedures and five concerned access to documents; notes that 13 out of the 16 inquiries were concluded in 2022 and that no maladministration was found in 11 cases while one partial maladministration and one maladministration was found in the other 2 cases; welcomes that the EEAS strives to reach a 100 % implementation rate of suggestions or recommendations put forward by the Ombudsman;

47. Welcomes that, in October 2022, the EEAS adopted the 'Principles of professional behaviour in the EEAS' summarising the professional behaviour expected from members of staff and that they must declare any conflicts of interest that may arise in the exercise of their duties, by sending a form to the EEAS ethics team; Notes that the EEAS continues to reflect on possible updates of the EEAS ethics framework; asks that Parliament is kept fully updated on any developments in this regard;

48. Stresses that while the EEAS is not an institution within the meaning of Article 13 of the TEU and does not have a direct role in Union legislation, it does, however, have an important role related to Union legislation with regard to decisions concerning sanctions and the negotiation of international trade agreements, which have a considerable regulatory impact; notes that it would be of great relevance 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;

49. Notes that, in 2022, the EEAS received four declarations of conflicts of interests and that they were handled professionally and on an individual basis; notes that the EEAS rejected granting permission for an outside activity and through relieving an employee from duties in relation to issues, funding or management of projects of his previous employer;

50. Notes that, in 2022, the EEAS received three notifications of intentions to join a private company out of 15 notifications of post-service activities; notes with satisfaction that a two-year cooling-off period was imposed on an established official for an activity of advisor for a law firm;

51. 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 conflicts of interest that are left unaddressed may compromise the enforcement of high ethical standards throughout the Union administration;

52. Notes with satisfaction that the EEAS has adopted a new anti-fraud strategy in 2023, which is now being implemented; asks to be updated about the implementation and will return to the issue during the discharge 2023; at the same time notes that the EEAS, together with the Commission, is already providing training courses on fraud and that such training is a mandatory part of pre-posting training;

53. Takes note that a reflection process on adoption of self-standing implementation provisions on outside activities and assignments is undergoing in the EEAS; requests that the Parliament is kept informed of any outcome and recalls the importance of such framework in order to protect the image and reputation of the Union in particular in case of Heads of Delegations;

54. Notes that the EEAS did not receive any cases concerning whistleblowing and that the EEAS applies the Commission guidelines on whistleblowing; encourages nevertheless, the EEAS to adopt its own policy adapted to the specific characteristics of the EEAS concerning this important issue and to establish a safe channel for potential whistle-blowers;

Digitalisation, cybersecurity and data protection

55. Notes that the EEAS operates its own Security Operation Centre, which deals with incident handling, and is located in Headquarters: warns that 129 cyberattacks on the EEAS were confirmed in 2022 and notes that the EEAS is a very likely target for actors with huge resources who want to create difficulties for Union institutions, especially those actors that are sponsored by foreign states; regrets that one major security incident that occurred in 2022 was not identified, due to its complexity, until 2023; welcomes that no confidential information was compromised; calls on the EEAS to continue to have a strong focus on cybersecurity and hybrid threats 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 cybersecurity framework;

56. Notes with satisfaction that the EDPS did not launch or complete any enquiries or investigations specifically targeting the EEAS in 2022; welcomes the EEAS' decision not to use Microsoft 365 due to security concerns but to continue using internal cloud applications hosted in Europe;

57. Continues to note 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 in the case of 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; welcomes that information systems hosted on a cloud contain data protection clauses based on joint recommendations from the EDPS and the Commission;

58. Notes that the EEAS' open source policy for digital solutions implies that open source is a viable solution if after an assessment, all tools and applications are deemed equal; notes that the EEAS is using a series of open source products to retain full ownership and control of its data;

59. Stresses that, ahead of increasing geopolitical challenges and crisis worldwide, the EU needs to be able to rely on necessary first-hand information on global issues occurring outside its borders; calls, in this regard, for strengthening the EU INTCEN, the EEAS Crisis Response Centre and the SatCen by enhancing its staff and financial resources, as well as its capabilities;

Buildings and security

60. Notes that the EEAS occupies and manages a very complex building portfolio comprising the EEAS HQ in Brussels and a large number of offices and Residences for Ambassadors around the world; notes that, at the beginning of 2022, the EEAS in Brussels took over 8 334 m^2 of building space from the Commission, which was previously occupied by EPSO;

61. Welcomes that, in 2022, the EEAS owned around 58 000 m^2 of office space and approximately 20 % of the 153 residences for ambassadors; notes that the EEAS estimates that the total savings coming from owning these building is around EUR 20 million per year; highly welcomes that the EEAS has developed a policy framework for a purchasing strategy, which was presented to the Budgetary Authority in 2023;

62. Notes that, since 2020, the EEAS has been developing its office management policy towards collaborative and flexible office concepts both at HQ and in Delegations; asks that this development is done in close cooperation with staff to ensure that legitimate concerns and points of view are taken into consideration;

63. Welcomes that the EEAS is focused on ensuring that its building are accessible to people with disabilities and reduced mobility; notes that the building in Brussels already fulfils such requirements and welcomes that for Union Delegations the EEAS selection procedures envisages barrier-free construction as a key selection criteria for new office buildings;

64. Notes that the main additional expenses for security in Union Delegations arose from the return of the EEAS to Kabul as the only European mission in Kabul after the takeover of the Taliban, the deteriorating security situation in countries and areas like Ukraine and Sahel and the need for more security equipment in Delegations; notes that the expenses were covered by delaying and postponing other expenses;

Environment and sustainability

65. Welcomes that, in April 2022, the EEAS signed a framework contract to assist in the preparation of an Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) for the EEAS HQ and the Delegations, while accepting that a lighter Environmental Management System (EMS) will have to be applied in many Delegations due to local limitations; asks for Parliament to be updated on the results of the implementation of these schemes both at HQ and in Delegations;

66. Welcomes that both the EEAS HQ and 20 Delegation buildings were equipped with photovoltaic panels by the end of 2022 and that three Delegations were equipped with such panels during the year; encourages the EEAS to continue to develop the installations of photovoltaic panels on all its buildings, as it improves the environmental footprint of a Delegation, save emissions, energy and money, reduce the dependency on generators and fuel and also demonstrates that the EEAS leads by example in support of the 'Green Deal';

67. Welcomes that, in 2022, the EEAS developed its first Commuting Plan with the objective of increasing the share of members of staff commuting to work via sustainable means, that the number of bike park places at the EEAS main building were doubled and that the EEAS continues to reimburse half of the costs of Brussels public transport for members of staff who do not apply for a car-parking badge;

68. Regrets that co-location agreements currently do not include clauses related to sustainability; notes that it would send a strong signal about the commitment of the EEAS to ensuring environmental sustainability if such agreements in the future would also ensure an explicit element about living up to certain environmental standards and targets; invites the EEAS to explore feasible options and encourage energy efficiency updates also in Delegations which are operating as co-locations;

69. Recalls that the direct and indirect impacts of climate change undermine global peace and security while deepening existing vulnerabilities and inequalities and pose risks to human rights; urges the Commission and the EEAS to design and conduct robust EU climate diplomacy with the aim to foster international cooperation towards the goals of the Paris Agreement, strengthen the external dimension of the Green New Deal and provide tangible support for ambitious CO_2 reduction targets in third countries;

Interinstitutional cooperation

70. Welcomes that the EEAS agreed two Service Level Agreements during 2022 with the Parliament, the first concerning the secondment of Parliament officials to an initial number of three Delegations (the United Nations in New York, the African Union in Ethiopia and ASEAN in Jakarta), where the staff seconded will integrate in the parliamentary affairs subsection of the political sections of the Delegations, and the second concerning Parliament staff at the liaison offices in London and Washington;

71. Notes that the process of replacing the 2002 interinstitutional agreement between the Parliament and the Council on the Parliament's access to classified information in the field of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is continuing at a very slow pace and apparently only one technical meeting took place during 2022 and one in 2023;

72. Welcomes that the EEAS declares that it cooperates excellently with OLAF, the EPPO and the Court and that there are regular meetings and exchanges of information between those institutions; further welcomes that the EEAS is negotiating dedicated working arrangements between the EEAS and the EPPO and asks that Parliament is being kept informed about any progress made in these negotiations;

73. Invites the EEAS to place emphasis on the procurement rules when negotiating dedicated working arrangements with the EPPO, as certain procedures might involve highly sensitive and even security-related information;

74. Welcomes that the EEAS actively cooperates with the EDPS through its Data Protection Officer, including by participating in roundtables, meetings to define the future objectives of the DPO network, and by contributing to the Working Group on International Transfers;

75. Welcomes that the EEAS cooperates closely with the Ombudsman and that the Ombudsman is now systematically invited to the EEAS pre-posting seminars to present their work in order to raise awareness about principles of good administrative behaviour;

Communication

76. Notes that the EEAS had a total budget of EUR 15,352 million for public communication and promotional activities and that public communication intensified significantly as a consequence of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine;

77. Welcomes that the EEAS adopted measures in order to ensure an improvement in the corporate use of social media, including ensuring that such use complies with IT security and data protection rules, to update the guidelines and to suspend paid advertisements on the corporate account; further takes note that guidelines were issued on the private use of social media;

78. Welcomes that the EEAS joined the open-source social media platform EU Voice pilot project by the EDPS and encourages it to also join the EU Video platform, taking into account the evolution of its popularity; also welcomes that the EEAS cooperates with other Union institutions in order to share experience and best practices;

79. Notes that the budget for combatting foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), including disinformation activities represented EUR 7,150 million in total in 2022; welcomes strongly that the EEAS has invested significantly in strengthening and building resilience to counter disinformation and foreign interference in Union affairs; stresses that EEAS is the main Union institution responsible for countering foreign interference;

80. Notes that the East StratCom Task Force stepped up its efforts to expose Kremlin disinformation campaigns following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and that the Task Force worked closely with independent media and civil society partners in the Eastern Europe Partnership countries to counter FIMI and that selected content on the EUvsDisinfo website was translated into multiple languages including some of the official Union languages as well as Ukrainian, Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Russian and Chinese;

81. Calls on the Union delegations in our neighbourhood and in the Western Balkan countries to increase their engagement in order to support a more active and effective communication policy on the European perspective and to be prepared to provide the best possible assistance to the countries engaged in pro-democratic and pro-European reforms; calls on the Union delegations to apply a more credible and merit-based approach based on the Copenhagen criteria, notably on the rule of law, democracy and the protection of human rights, especially given the limited progress made by some countries in the Western Balkans;

82. Calls on Union delegations to enhance support to genuine democratic actors and civil society in the Western Balkans as well as strongly and publicly denounce actions by illiberal and undemocratic actors that go against the Union's interest and ensure the implementation of IPA III funding is in line with the Union's objectives;

83. Continues to encourage 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 the rule of law, fundamental rights and fight against corruption as well as to debunk disinformation campaigns threatening democratic values orchestrated by foreign state actors; asks the Union delegations 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; calls on Union delegations to respect high standards for accountability and transparency when engaging with regional partners; asks Union delegations to assure that Union funds awarded in third countries are used effectively, efficiently and in line with the Union's values, policies and financial rules enshrined in, among other places, the Financial Regulation, which lays down transparency as one of its guiding budgetary principles; asks to pay particular attention to avoid unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles and support beneficiaries to prevent errors impacting the error rate; 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;

84. Urges the EEAS and the Union delegations to closely monitor the state of democracy in the different countries and to provide logistical and technological support to human rights defenders and indigenous persons, in particular women;

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the situation in Gaza

85. Notes that the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has had a very strong impact on the budget of the EEAS through rising inflation, not least in many parts of the world where the EEAS carries out most of its operations, such inflation has also had an impact on increasing expenses for security and IT equipment;

86. Notes that the delegation in Ukraine has 108 staff members of which around 60 % were local and 40 % expatriate staff before the invasion and that non-essential staff were asked to leave a week before the outbreak of the invasion; notes furthermore, that the Union Delegation to Russia in January had 25 expatriate staff and 36 local staff and two staff from the EIB and that Russia, in April 2022, expelled 18 members of the Delegation after 19 members of the Russian Permanent mission to the EI in Brussels were declared personae non grata;

87. Emphasises that the Union needs to continue developing a robust and resilient external service with clear political leadership in order to order to tackle the current challenges and ensure the coherence of the Union's foreign policy; in that respect notes the key role of the EEAS and especially of its Delegations in the context of the geopolitical impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the resulting need to support partner countries around the world and strengthen global alliances; highlights the importance of continued strong political engagement and leverage at bilateral level, as well as in public and cultural diplomacy to promote the Union's values, principles and interests, and in strategic communications to combat disinformation; calls for more efficient use of available resources to be introduced to avoid putting the Union's effectiveness at risk on the international scene; calls on the EEAS to continue its efforts to modernise its approaches and invest in new skills and capabilities while increasing cost-efficiency;

88. Is extremely concerned about the continued engagement of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban with the Russian President despite Union sanctions and an International Criminal Court arrest warrant for war crimes against the latter in light of the ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine; stresses that, under Article 24(3) TEU, Member States have the obligation to support the Union's external and security policy actively and unreservedly in a spirit of loyalty and mutual solidarity, and shall refrain from actions contrary to the Union's interest; reminds the HR/VP of his obligation to ensure Member States' compliance with the principles under this article, and invites him, against this backdrop, to report to Parliament on his consideration of the Hungarian Prime Minister's policy vis-à-vis Russia and compliance with this Treaty article, as well as any potential action he has undertaken;

89. Strongly condemns the use of sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon of war in Ukraine, classifying it as a war crime; highlights the growing reports of human trafficking, sexual violence, exploitation, rape and abuse faced by women and children fleeing Ukraine to Europe; calls on Member States to address the specific needs of women and girls in reception centres, ensuring immediate availability of gender-based violence services; urges the Union and host and transit countries to guarantee access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services; calls on the Union and its Member States to support organisations providing services and shelter to gender-based violence survivors among refugee women and girls;

90. Deeply regrets all conflict-related sexual violence; emphasises that this targeted form of brutal sexual violence and torture against women is systematically used in war conflicts to terrorise and to humiliate the population; in this context, strongly deplores the devastating suffering of women during the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023 in which Hamas perpetrated rape and other forms of ferocious sexual torture against women, female teenagers and girls of Israeli and other nationalities, according to a UN mission report and a report of the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel; regrets the lack of leadership of the EEAS and the Commission and their delayed reactions to these cruel attacks; strongly calls on the EEAS to establish a better global strategy to prevent these kinds of attacks, to provide support to women living in areas of risk and conflict zones, and to continue to publicly condemn any kind of sexual violence and torture;

91. Welcomes that the HR/VP convened an extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council on 10 October 2023 shortly after the horrific Hamas terror attack on Israel; further takes note that the European Council established a common position on the situation in Israel and Palestine at its extraordinary meeting on 17 October 2023 including an action plan with several work strands; is extremely concerned about speculation that Union taxpayers' money could be used by Hamas, instead of benefitting the Palestinian civilian population, and thus, notes with satisfaction that the review of the Union's assistance for Palestine finalised in November 2023 ([1]) has shown that no evidence has been found to date that money has been diverted for unintended purposes; is concerned by the serious allegations made by Israel that 12 UNRWA employees might have been involved in acts of terror and notes that the Agency immediately terminated their contracts, launched a UN investigation and appointed an independent review group; notes the EEAS' constant monitoring to prevent Union funds being misused by terrorist organisations such as Hamas; notes that the review has also shown that the Commission applies adequate *ex ante* and *ex post* controls and that the safeguards in place are effective; recalls the Agency's irreplaceable role in the humanitarian response in Gaza, and in ensuring the uninterrupted delivery of vital services to vulnerable Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East; asks the EEAS to keep Parliament informed about changes in cooperation between the EEAS and the Palestinian Authority;

92. Acknowledges that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the situation in Gaza impose a financial burden on Member States, European citizens, and the functioning of Union institutions. Emphasises the importance of reviewing the allocated financial resources for Ukraine and Gaza to ensure transparency and accountability in the utilisation of these funds.

([1]) Communication to the Commission 'Review of ongoing financial assistance for Palestine', C(2023)8300 final.