RESOLUTION (EU) 2022/1747 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

of 4 May 2022

with observations forming an integral part of the decision on discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Environment Agency (EEA) for the financial year 2020

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT,

— having regard to its decision on discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Environment Agency for the financial year 2020,

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

— having regard to the opinion of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety,

— having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A9-0113/2022),

A. whereas, according to its statement of revenue and expenditure ([1]), the final budget of the European Environmental Agency (the 'Agency') for the financial year 2020 was EUR 89 649 723, representing an increase of 18,48 % compared to 2019 due to an increase in external assigned revenue; whereas the inflation rate was 0,7 % in the Union in 2020; whereas the Agency's budget derives mainly from the Union budget (75,29 %) and the contributions under specific agreement for the Copernicus programme (22,68 %);

B. whereas the Court of Auditors (the 'Court'), in its report on the annual accounts of the European Environmental Agency for the financial year 2020 (the 'Court's report'), has stated that it has obtained reasonable assurances that the Agency's annual accounts are reliable and that the underlying transactions are legal and regular;

Budget and financial management

1. Notes with satisfaction that the budget monitoring efforts during the financial year 2020 resulted in a budget implementation rate of 99,96 %, representing a slight decrease of 0,04 % compared to 2019; notes that the payment appropriations execution rate was 86,12 %, representing a decrease of 3,71 % compared to the previous year;

2. Notes the key role of the Agency in delivering quality data on the state of the environment, which becomes increasingly important in light of the huge challenges that the Union faces in tackling climate change and biodiversity loss; welcomes that the Agency's opinion is being heard throughout the institutions of the Union and recommends that the scientific committee of the Agency play a key role in advising the Commission;

Performance

3. Notes that the Agency reports that it has achieved what it had set out to do by exceeding the expectations of its key performance indicators in 2020 despite the risks and challenges the organisation had to manage due to the COVID-19 pandemic;

4. Notes, with regard to the follow-up to the 2019 discharge report, that the Agency engages with the Commission in identifying and sharing tasks with relevant Commission services, thereby avoiding overlapping tasks; notes that the Agency has not identified any overlapping tasks with other agencies in the EU Agencies' Network; notes that the Agency coordinates certain tasks and co-creates certain reports with other agencies such as the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA);

([1]) OJ C 114, 31.3.2021, p. 14.

5. Notes, regarding the follow-up to observations from the 2019 discharge report concerning dissatisfaction with the delivery of some of the Agency's activities, that the Agency has taken on additional new tasks such as the European Green Deal, the 8th Environmental Action Programme and Sustainable Finance, which have not been accompanied by sufficient resources and staff to meet the ambitions laid down in its legislation; notes that the Agency directly supported the implementation of the European Green Deal and the 2030 policy framework on climate and energy through several activities and collaboration with the Commission; further notes that the Agency has allocated operational staff only to deliver these activities, which increasingly stresses its support functions; calls on the Agency to enter into discussion with the Commission, where appropriate through the EU Agencies Network, to address these issues and to report to the discharge authority on the developments in this regard;

6. Notes, with regard to the follow-up to observations from the 2019 discharge report concerning its IT network, that the Agency had initiated digitalisation initiatives prior to the pandemic in 2020 and that, since March 2020, those initiatives were accelerated by the lockdown situation; calls on the Agency to continue to monitor the cybersecurity threat landscape and take the appropriate measures;

7. Notes that the Agency presented the '2020 Air quality in Europe report', documenting the impact of lockdown measures on air quality in European cities, using the unique situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic;

8. Stresses that the Agency provides sound, independent information on the environment; commends the quality of its outputs released in 2020, including assessing the effect of the COVID-19 lockdown measures on air pollutant concentrations, developing a new industrial emissions portal, collecting the first data on CO_2 emissions from heavy-duty vehicles and preparing for future reporting on real-world CO_2 emissions;

9. Recalls that, in 2020, the Agency provided the State of the Environment Report 2020 ([2]), alongside assessments and briefings on topics such as biowaste management and treatment, biodegradable plastics, the emerging challenges of waste management in Europe, air quality and noise pollution, and how Europe will be affected by key climate hazards such as droughts, floods, forest fires and sea level rise during the 21st century and beyond;

Staff policy

10. Acknowledges that, on 31 December 2020, the establishment plan was 96,92 % filled, with three permanent officials and 123 temporary agents appointed out of 130 posts authorised under the Union budget (124 authorised posts in 2019); notes that, in addition, 71 contract agents and 12 seconded national experts were working for the Agency in 2020;

11. Deplores that the ratio between support staff responsible for administration as well as coordination and operational staff working on content, is out of balance; suggests that the Agency should receive more support staff, to guarantee its functioning;

12. Notes the gender balance within the Agency's senior management members, with 5 out of 8 (62,50 %) being men; notes the gender balance within the Agency's management board, with 16 out of 30 (53,34 %) being men; notes the gender balance within the Agency's overall staff, with 111 out of 203 (54,68 %) being women; points out, however, that, in the recruitment of new staff and in connection with promotions, the Agency should bear in mind that candidates' skills, knowledge and experience are the most important factors; points out that the need for a geographical balance among staff members should also be borne in mind;

13. Notes, regarding the observations in the 2019 discharge on limited assets, that the Agency continues to report its assessment of resource needs to the Commission; further notes that these resources are not always met or included in the draft budget put forward by the Commission; calls on the Commission and the Agency to work out a sustainable plan to provide the Agency with resources according to its needs and tasks and to report back on the developments in this regard to the discharge authority;

([2]) European Environment – State and Outlook 2020 https://www.eea.europa.eu/soer/2020

14. Is concerned about the large size of the Agency's management board which makes decision-making difficult and generates considerable administrative costs;

15. Notes, regarding the replies to the standard questionnaire, that in 2020, in the legislation for Sustainable Finance, the Commission designated the Agency to deliver supporting tasks and included one temporary agent and one contract agent post, with an associated increase of EUR 0,3 million in the Agency's Union subsidy, in order to give the Agency the staffing to deliver the additional tasks; further notes that Parliament amended the Agency's 2020 budget, increasing the core subsidy by EUR 1,3 million and awarding five temporary agent and two contract agent posts in order to give the Agency resources to support new tasks under the European Green Deal, in particular that of fighting climate change and biodiversity loss;

16. Notes, with regard to the follow-up to the 2019 discharge report regarding staff guidelines, that the Agency revised its sensitive post policy and adopted on 3 December 2020 the decision of its management board on EEA Guidelines on the Identification and Management of Sensitive Posts in accordance with the recommendations of the Court of Auditors;

17. Welcomes the efforts made in staff policy to promote teleworking and healthy life and continues to encourage the Agency to pursue the development of a long term human resources policy framework that addresses the work-life balance, the lifelong guidance and career development, the gender balance, the teleworking, the geographical balance and the recruitment and integration of people with disabilities;

Procurement

18. Notes that the Agency actively pursues joint procurement procedures with the Commission; notes that the Agency focuses on converting to electronic administration processes (procurement, finance and human resources), which has delivered efficiency gains and supported it to switch quickly and effectively to a working-from-home environment at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic;

Prevention and management of conflicts of interests, and transparency

19. Acknowledges the Agency's existing measures and ongoing efforts to secure transparency to prevent and manage conflicts of interests, and to provide whistleblower protection;

20. Notes, with regard to the follow-up to the 2019 discharge report, that the Agency's management board members are continuously reminded of the request to provide CVs and declarations of interest for publication on the Agency's website; is strongly of the opinion that the publication of CVs and declarations of interest of management board members should be obligatory and not done on a voluntary basis; calls on the Agency to make sure that management board members meet this requirement and report to the discharge authority on the developments in this regard;

Internal control

21. Acknowledges the assessment of the internal control framework carried out by the Agency and its conclusion that while in previous years some internal control principles were implemented and effectively functioned, these principles are now considered to be only partially implemented or partially effective; takes note of the Agency's conclusion that this requires a prompt response by management to a new way of working; notes that, despite the uncertain circumstances surrounding COVID-19, the Agency's internal control System show that the Agency's staff managed to adapt quickly to the situation and delivered the work programme envisaged for 2020, embedding new procedures in their actions;

COVID-19 response and business continuity

22. 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 leave a low vacancy rate at the end of the year;

23. Notes that the Agency's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its related restrictions, had a positive impact on most of the environmental performance data of the Agency for 2020, showing a substantial fall in the greenhouse gas emissions from missions and meetings (a drop of approximately 90 % compared to the 2015-2019 average) and significant reductions in the use of electricity, heating, water, paper and waste due to fewer staff in the Agency's premises, calls on the Agency to carry forward into its operations in the coming years the lessons learned in the wake of the pandemic in this regard;

Other comments

24. Welcomes the Agency's decision to strengthen its commitment to move from climate-friendly to climate-neutral operations in line with the Union's increased climate targets;

25. Invites the Agency to continue promoting cooperation with other agencies of the Union and international organisations, in order to better assess the environmental impacts of human activity and fostering dialogue with stakeholders and citizens;

26. Welcomes the efforts made by the Agency to create an environment-friendly working frame and all the measures taken by the Agency to reduce its carbon footprint, its energy consumption and to develop a paperless workflow; notes, regarding the follow-up to observations from the 2019 discharge report on cost efficiency and environmentally friendly practices, that the Agency's office building dates back to the 19th century and the options to improve the energy efficiency of the premises are therefore limited; notes that, as part of its environmental management system, the Agency is committed to continuously improve its overall energy performance by replacing selected windows in the building and moving to an activity-based workspace on several floors that will deliver additional improvements of the energy performance per unit area; notes, in addition, that the Agency purchases 100 % of electricity from renewable sources; calls on the Agency to report to the discharge authority on the developments in this regard;

27. Notes, with regard to the follow-up observations on accessibility, that the Agency has yet to arrange its online platforms to make them accessible to persons with disabilities;

28. Recalls the importance to increase 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 agencies at all costs; draws attention, however, to the need to take all the necessary security measures to avoid any risk to the online security of the processed information; calls on the Agency to develop its cyber-security policy swifter, delivered it before 31 January 2022 and report back to the discharge authority;

29. Notes, regarding the follow-up observations on the dissemination of its results to the public, that the Agency has implemented online outreach activities and boosted innovative formats such as launch events, 'Ask an expert' series and debates in 2020; notes that the Agency participates in a cross-agency project to improve its indicators focused on their communication potential; notes that the number of registered sessions in the Agency's website was higher than 8 million in 2020; calls on the Agency to report to the discharge authority on future changes aimed to streamline the Agency's online presence;

30. Notes, regarding the follow-up from the Court observations on media reach, that the Agency continues to develop its visibility as a trustworthy source for environment and climate knowledge at Union level; notes that in 2020 the Agency published 25 626 media articles, an 80 % increase compared to 2019, and reached 178 593 combined followers, a 56 % increase compared to 2019;

31. Refers, for other observations of a cross-cutting nature accompanying its decision on discharge, to its resolution of 4 May 2022 ([3]) on the performance, financial management and control of the agencies.

([3]) Texts adopted, P9_TA(2022)0196.