RESOLUTION (EU) 2021/1576 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

of 29 April 2021

with observations forming an integral part of the decision on discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Environment Agency for the financial year 2019

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 2019,

— 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 (A9-0080/2021),

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 2019 was EUR 75 663 812, representing an increase of 14,99 % compared to 2018; whereas the Agency's budget derives mainly from the Union budget (86,85 %) and the contributions under specific agreements, namely the Copernicus programme (13,15 %);

B. whereas the Court of Auditors (the 'Court'), in its report on the annual accounts of the Agency for the financial year 2019 (the 'Court's report'), has stated that it has obtained reasonable assurance that the Agency's annual accounts are reliable and that the underlying transactions are legal and regular;

Budget and financial management

1. Notes with appreciation that the budget monitoring efforts during the financial year 2019 resulted in a budget implementation rate of 99,99 %, representing an increase of 0,04 % compared to 2018; notes with concern that the payment appropriations execution rate was 89,83 %, representing an decrease of 1,23 % compared to the previous year;

Performance

2. Notes that the Agency uses certain measurements as key performance indicators (KPIs) to assess the added value provided by its activities and other measurements to improve its budget management, such as realised staff resources in the annual establishment plan, rate of annual budgetary commitments and number of registered sessions on the Agency's website;

3. Notes that for the third year running, the 'data and maps' section was the most visited of the Agency's website, with more than 2,75 million page views and the Agency's web map servers received 375 million requests to view maps produced by the Agency (representing a 25 % increase compared to 2018); believes that dissemination of environmental information is of key importance, especially in view of the European Green Deal;

4. Stresses that the Agency provides sound, independent information on the environment; commends the quality of its outputs released in 2019, such as the reports about sustainability transitions in Europe, climate change adaptation in the agricultural sector, preventing plastic waste, the greenhouse gas intensity of transport fuels and the State of the Environment Report;

5. Notes that an internal review of the functioning of the management board and bureau led to an increased role for the bureau, greater use of videoconferences and reduced travel to Copenhagen for bureau members;

([1]) OJ C 165, 13.5.2020, p. 1.

6. Notes that, according to the Agency, it continuously engages with the Commission to identify and agree on the division of 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;

7. Notes that the Agency achieved its 2019 objectives as set out in the Agency's annual work programme to provide European decision-makers and citizens with access to timely and relevant information and knowledge to provide a sound basis for environmental policies;

8. Notes that the Agency initiated the development of the Agency's and the European Environment Observation and Information Network (Eionet) strategy for 2021-2030 in 2019 and that this strategy was adopted in December 2020;

9. Recalls that, in 2019, the Agency implemented new data flows for the monitoring of CO_2 from new heavy duty vehicles, supported the implementation of the Energy Union Governance and continued streamlining of environmental reporting;

10. Notes that the Agency marked its 25th anniversary with several events and publications recognising the work carried out by the Agency and looking forward to the Agency's goals in the future;

11. Encourages the Agency to work together with the other relevant agencies of the Union in order to better assess environmental impacts of human activity; notes the Agency's examples of joint activities with other agencies, such as publishing the European Aviation Environmental Report 2019 together with the European Aviation Safety Agency and planning with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the Commission an innovative virtual EU observatory on climate change and health; calls on the Agency to further expand cooperation with other agencies;

12. Stresses that that the aims of the Agency are pan-European and that, for this reason, it is necessary for it to cooperate closely with third countries located in Europe; notes the Agency's comment according to which the new EEA-Eionet Strategy 2021-2030 sets out the Commission's political priorities with respect to the European Green Deal's agenda for the wider pan-European area, as well as the new Union financial instruments that were being shaped in 2019, in order to be in place in early 2021;

13. Regrets that some activities could not be fully delivered in 2019 due to several circumstances; notes with concern that the management board stressed that the Agency's capacity to further respond adequately to policy developments will depend on an increase in allocated core resources or the further prioritisation and/or discontinuation of current core tasks; notes that the Agency assesses where the allocated resources deliver best value and has as part of the draft budget 2021 submission added resources to match new tasks in line with policy developments;

14. Calls on the Agency to continue to develop its synergies and increase its cooperation and exchange of good practices with other agencies of the Union with a view to improving efficiency (human resources, building management, IT services and security);

15. Stresses the importance to increase the digitalisation of the Agency in terms of internal operations and management 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 information processed;

16. Commends the Agency's pro-active engagement with the media to develop greater visibility in the media, on the internet and on social media in order to make its work known;

Staff policy

17. Notes that, on 31 December 2019, the establishment plan was 96,77 % implemented, with 3 officials and 117 temporary agents appointed out of 124 posts authorised under the Union budget (compared to 124 authorised posts in 2018); notes that, in addition, 61 contract agents and 19 seconded national experts were working for the Agency in 2019;

18. Notes the lack of gender balance reported for 2019 with regard to senior managers (seven men and two women) and to the management board (18 men and 14 women); asks the Agency to ensure gender balance at the management level in the future; asks the Commission and the Member States to take into account the importance of ensuring gender balance when nominating their members to the Agency's management board;

19. Notes that the Agency has adopted a policy on protecting the dignity of the person and preventing harassment; takes note that one alleged harassment case was reported in 2019 that led to an administrative inquiry and disciplinary proceedings;

20. Notes that the EEA is expected to play a key role (monitoring, reporting and validating) in supporting the European Green Deal actions and the 8th General Union Environment Action Programme ([2]); insists therefore the staff budget for the Agency should be increased to meet these obligations; notes that any future cuts will negatively impact the functioning of the Agency and the delivery of the European Green Deal;

21. Notes with concern, regarding the follow-up on the Court's recommendations from previous years, that the Agency does not have an up-to-date policy covering sensitive posts; notes from the Agency's reply that the Agency has carried out an inventory of its sensitive posts since 2009 and that its guidelines on the identification and management of sensitive functions have been reviewed in light of the implemented reorganisation and have been finalised; calls on the Agency to adopt and implement the sensitive posts policy without delay;

22. Notes that, according to the Court of Auditors' Special Report on the Future of the Agencies, the Agency faces the risks of limited resources; calls on the Commission together with the Agency to work out a sustainable plan to provide the Agency with resources according to its needs and tasks; calls on the Commission and the Agency to report back on the developments in this regard to the discharge authority;

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

24. Encourages the Agency to pursue the development of a long term human resources policy framework which addresses work-life balance, lifelong guidance and career development, gender balance, teleworking, geographical balance and recruitment and integration of people with disabilities;

25. Underlines that post-public employment and 'revolving door' conflict-of-interest situations are a problem common to many bodies and agencies across the Union;

Procurement

26. Notes from the Court's report, with regard to recommendations made for the year 2019 and the follow-up from previous years' findings, that the Agency entered into a contract for services for an amount above the ceiling of the governing framework contract but did not formalise it through a contract amendment and did not correctly monitor the accumulative consumption of the contract before placing a new order; notes from the Agency's reply that the Agency has ensured for the future that any modification to a contract, including its budget ceiling, is formalised through a contract amendment, and that finance, resource and authorising officers will be reminded to always check available contract budget within ceilings prior to placing specific contracts and to ensure timely updating of the systems control tool; nevertheless calls on the Agency to formalise contract modifications in line with public procurement provisions;

([2]) Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a General Union Environment Action Programme to 2030 (COM(2020)0652).

Prevention and management of conflicts of interest and transparency

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

28. Recalls that the publication of CVs and declarations of interest of management board members should be obligatory as currently not all management board members' CVs and declarations of interest are published on the Agency's website; calls on the Agency to publish the CVs and declarations of interest of all the members of the management board and to report to the discharge authority on the measures taken in this regard;

29. Raises concerns again that the Agency does not put in place declarations of conflict of interest for in-house experts;

30. Underlines the fact that the current ethical framework applying to Union institutions and agencies suffers from considerable drawbacks due to its fragmentation and lack of consistency between existing provisions; highlights that these issues should be addressed by setting up a common ethical framework, ensuring the application of high ethical standards for all EU institutions and agencies;

31. Underlines that certain officials fill in declarations of absence of conflicts of interest and provide self-assessments with regard to respect for ethical standards; highlights, however, that such self-declarations and self-assessments are not sufficient and that additional scrutiny is therefore needed;

Internal Controls

32. Notes that in 2019 the Commission's Internal Audit Service (IAS) issued an audit report on procurement, identifying one very important weakness related to the monitoring of procurement procedures and contract management; notes that an action plan has been developed and accepted by the IAS to respond to those findings;

Sustainability

33. Welcomes the Agency's efforts to provide a cost-effective and environmentally-friendly workplace and all the measures taken by the Agency to reduce its carbon footprint, its energy consumption and to develop a paperless workflow; and to preferably reduce and offset its CO_2 emissions in the areas of premises and travel; regrets, however, the low energy efficiency of the Agency's headquarters;

Other Comments

34. Notes that the Agency engaged in the process of preparing for the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Union, in particular, the related preparation of corresponding IT systems during 2019;

35. Welcomes the Agency's efforts to build a more diverse and inclusive work environment and culture by taking actions in favour of people with disabilities; asks the Agency to assess the possibilities of further strengthening and integrating the principles of equal opportunities in recruitment, training, career development, working conditions as well as to raise staff awareness of these aspects, and to assess the possible reasonable improvements and modifications of the Agency's buildings (access, adequate office equipment) for people with reduced mobility or other disabilities;

36. Points out that a complex approach is needed in order to make the Union institutions' home pages accessible to persons with all kind of disabilities as set out in Directive (EU) 2016/2102 ([3]), including the availability of national sign languages; suggests that organisations representing disabled persons are involved in this process;

37. Encourages the Agency to undertake further initiatives focusing on disseminating the results of its research to the public, and to reach out to the public via social media and other media outlets;

38. Refers, for other observations of a cross-cutting nature accompanying its decision on discharge, to its resolution of 29 April 2021 ([4]) on the performance, financial management and control of the agencies.

([3]) Directive (EU) 2016/2102 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 October 2016 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies (OJ L 327, 2.12.2016, p. 1).

([4]) Texts adopted, P9_TA(2021)0215.