RESOLUTION (EU) 2021/1555 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 general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2019, Section VII – Committee of the Regions

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 2019, Section VII – Committee of the Regions,

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

— having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A9-0055/2021),

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;

1. Notes with satisfaction that the Court of Auditors (the 'Court'), in its annual report for 2019 (the 'Court's report'), observed that no significant weaknesses had been identified in respect of the audited topics relating to human resources and procurement for the Committee of the Regions (the 'Committee');

2. Welcomes the fact that, based on its audit work, the Court concluded that the payments as a whole for the year ended 31 December 2019, comprising the administrative and other expenditure of the Committee, were free from material error and that the examined supervisory and control systems were effective;

3. Regrets, as a general observation, that chapter 9 'Administration' of the Court's report has a rather limited scope and conclusions, notwithstanding the fact that the Multiannual Financial Framework Heading 5 'Administration' is considered to be low risk; requests that the audit work for that chapter be more focused on issues of high relevance or even critical importance for the Committee;

4. Recalls that the Committee's budget is mostly administrative, with a large amount being used for expenditure concerning persons working within the institution (Title 1) and concerning buildings, movable property, equipment and miscellaneous operating costs;

5. Notes that in 2019 the Committee had an approved budget of EUR 98 751 000 (compared to EUR 96 101 000 in 2018 and EUR 93 295 000 in 2017); notes that the execution rate for commitments was 99,6 % in 2019 (compared to 99,3 % in 2018 and 98,1 % in 2017) and that the execution rate for payments in 2019 of 88,8 % was lower than the execution rates for payments of 91,0 % in 2018 and of 89,9 % in 2017; notes, however, that the final execution rate for payment for 2019 will be higher at the end of the budget cycle (after payment of carry-overs);

6. Underlines that the execution rate of commitments for Title 1 was 99,6 % and for Title 2 was 99,7 %; notes with satisfaction that approximately EUR 400 000 (0,4 %) remained uncommitted at the end of the year and therefore returned to the Union budget, which represented a reduction compared to 2018 when approximately EUR 700 000 (0,7 %) remained uncommitted;

Human Resources

7. Notes that the total number of staff was 576 in 2019 (compared to 538 in 2018 and 533 in 2017); notes that the number of posts in the establishment plan amounts to 491 which is considered by the Committee as insufficient; recognises the results of a workload assessment finalised in 2019 for a potential reorganisation with the objective of making further efficiency gains and create synergies; is informed that the Committee wants the Union budgetary authorities to address the issue and to balance the current staff situation progressively; encourages the Committee to deepen its administrative cooperation with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) via the joint services arrangement to pool resources in order to develop more synergies;

8. Acknowledges the Committee's continued efforts to reinforce its political role and to face the increased need for permanent expertise in political and administrative domains; notes the talent pool created to motivate and retain experienced staff in the Committee; notes that the first general internal competition in the history of the Committee was finalised in the first half of 2019 with a total of 40 laureates out of 113 candidate members of staff; asks the Committee to explain the concrete professional prospects offered to the laureates;

9. Notes that the transfer of 24 translation posts from the Committee to the Parliament was estimated to result in yearly savings amounting to approximately EUR 2,9 million, invites the Committee to present a report on the impact of this transfer;

10. Regrets that the situation in terms of gender balance in middle and senior management positions has not improved but has rather remained relatively stable since 2018, with 35 % of these positions being filled by women; acknowledges that a new equal opportunity strategy containing concrete objectives to be reached by 2025 has been adopted; calls upon the Committee to present the roadmap for the adoption and planned impact of the new equal opportunity strategy, and to report, on an annual basis, to the discharge authority on its implementation and on its preliminary results;

11. Welcomes the appointment of an equal opportunities officer working centrally in the HR directorate, as well as the 'equal opportunities roadshows'; asks the Committee to report on the concrete achievements of the new strategy, including the results of the actions taken with regard to improving diversity and to making the Committee a more inclusive workplace for persons with disabilities;

12. Notes that all Union nationalities were represented in 2019, with the exception of Luxembourg; calls on the Committee to continue to strive for the achievement of geographical balance among its staff in order to establish a proper representation of nationals from all Member States, including at management level; encourages the Committee to enhance its communication efforts in those countries that are under-represented;

13. Encourages the Committee to continue its efforts to achieve gender balance at all hierarchical levels and welcomes actions such as the mandatory presence of both genders on selection panels, the active encouragement of female applicants for all managerial positions, specific training sessions for female staff who wish to prepare for a managerial career and more flexible working arrangements, including the possibility for part time work and telework; notes the range of incentives put in place by the Committee such as the formal recognition of management responsibilities below head of unit level and the creation of an informal network for gender balance in management, launched with the support of the administration;

14. Acknowledges the fact that the new equal opportunity strategy also focuses on disability and diversity; notes the training regarding unconscious bias provided for managers and HR staff involved in selection procedures; asks the Committee to report to the budgetary authority on the specific objectives, actions and indicators within the strategy;

15. Appreciates the Committee's focus on developing and upholding high-quality health and well-being services based on prevention and early intervention through close cooperation between the HR services concerned, and on awareness-raising programmes for both managerial and other staff; welcomes the training sessions held with managers at both junior, middle and senior level on the topic of absence management and the successful integration of colleagues after long-term absence; notes that ten cases of burnout were registered in 2019; notes that the Committee's social service provides assistance during the illness period and upon return to work; asks the Committee to include burnout detection in its health and well-being services; welcomes the increased flexitime and teleworking arrangements to improve the work-life balance of staff, as well as the continuation of the stress and burnout prevention programme; encourages the Committee to complete the flexible working arrangements with a protection of staff members' 'right to disconnect';

16. Underlines that the Committee uses mainly contract staff to provide appropriate support in the form of replacements for mid to long term absences and for specific projects in different directorates with the objective of providing additional support to members of the Committee; recalls, however, that the use of contract staff also entails considerable loss of knowledge and expertise for the Committee at the end of their contracts and therefore encourages the Committee to continue negotiating the enlargement of its establishment plan; notes that in 2019, as a consequence of the cooperation between the Committee and Parliament, the number of long-term contract staff decreased in the directorate for translation of the Committee and the EESC as compared to the years 2013 to 2017;

17. Notes that the Committee needs to upgrade its security control systems and ensure a safe workplace for its members and staff, something that requires additional specialised resources, and that the ratio of resources dedicated to both physical security and IT support per member of staff is very low in comparison to other Union entities; encourages the Committee to continue preparing new projects to boost cybersecurity;

18. Notes that the Committee identified additional projects in the area of modernisation of administration and communication, such as support for better law-making through *ex ante* and *ex post* monitoring of implementation of Union legislation on the ground as well as outreach activities to involve all local and regional authorities in the process, and that these additional projects require adequate resources;

Communication

19. Underlines that an external evaluation of the communication strategy of the Committee was carried out in accordance with the standards applied by all other Union entities using a shared framework contract; notes that the quality of the Committee's communication did not always meet audience needs but is effective in an overall sense as key stakeholders have a positive perception of the Committee; invites the Committee to improve digital communication with the public and to enhance the visibility of its studies for stakeholders and for Union citizens; encourages the Committee to reach out to Parliament to enhance cooperation, for instance through the organisation of joint meetings and events;

20. Requests that the Committee report on how it will implement the recommendations of the evaluation report; notes that the biggest successes of the Committee's communication are the citizens' dialogues with the Commission and the Committee's own local dialogues, the flagship events 'EuroPCom' (European conference on public communication) and the 'European week of the regions and cities';

Digitalisation, cybersecurity

21. Welcomes the fact that the bureau of the Committee adopted a digital strategy at the beginning of 2019, on the basis of the Tallinn Declaration on e-Government with its core principle of 'Digital by default', and that implementation started following the adoption; notes that the main deliverables of the strategy are member-oriented information systems to support the political work of the Committee, information systems to support paperless administrative processes and a digital workplace programme; invites the Committee to enhance digitalisation through interinstitutional cooperation also;

22. Welcomes the interinstitutional cyber cooperation for which the Committee received the assistance of the Computer Emergency Response Team for the EU institutions, bodies and agencies, such as on-the-job training for cloud security and cyber threat intelligence information for targeted attacks against Union bodies; notes that many of the digitalisation projects concern the digitalisation of human resources and financial processes, where the Committee uses the SYSPER and ABAC systems provided by the Commission; asks the Committee to examine the possibility of negotiating better conditions with the Commission to enhance and make the process of application sharing financially attractive;

23. Notes that the IT budget is shared with the EESC; highlights the fact that the IT budget was increased in 2019, based on budget transfers, from EUR 7 963 825 in 2018 to EUR 9 082 838,76 in 2019; welcomes the fact that the IT unit worked to deliver information systems supporting four operational domains, namely political work, document management, communication and HR/finance, and that, as regards the digital workplace, progress has been made with all aspects of the programme;

24. Welcomes the Committee's active policy on open-source technology; encourages the Committee to prioritise open source technology in order to prevent vendor lock-in, to retain control over its own technical systems, to provide stronger safeguards for the privacy and data protection of the users, and to increase security and transparency for the public; notes that 39 open source software applications were included in the inventory of software packages in 2019 and that there are currently active projects taking place to implement a new digital signature portal and a management console based on open source technology;

25. Encourages the Committee to follow the recommendations of the European Data Protection Supervisor to renegotiate the interinstitutional licensing agreement and implementation contract, signed between the Union institutions and Microsoft in 2018, with the objective of achieving digital sovereignty, avoiding vendor lock-in and lack of control, and ensuring the protection of personal data;

Buildings, security

26. Welcomes the fact that a series of measures has been implemented to ensure adequate building security standards, such as the installation of new equipment for access control and the installation of a new closed-circuit television (CCTV) system; notes that the related security standards have reached the same level as those of Parliament and the Commission and that, moreover, the procurement process has started for the new visitor's management system planned to be installed in 2020;

27. Notes the guiding principles of the Committee's building strategy which include the geographical concentration of buildings, the preference for ownership rather than lease, a sustainable building management and multi-annual planning; notes that the working group set up jointly with the EESC established guidelines for the use and the distribution of office space, taking into account the situation in other Union bodies; appreciates that these parameters were presented to and discussed with staff representatives; acknowledges the Committee's transparent and cooperative approach vis-à-vis staff representatives; notes that a total of 241 work stations are not in use and asks the Committee to explain its plans for those work stations within the current building strategy;

28. Recognises that the Committee together with the EESC has given instructions to remove asbestos in autumn 2020 while fully respecting the necessary protection measures during the works as requested in the 2018 discharge resolution; welcomes the fact that most of the buildings of both the Committee and the EESC are asbestos free; expresses concerns over the health of workers and the presence of asbestos in the VMA building; acknowledges, however, that the Committee has received an asbestos-safe certificate;

Internal management, internal control, finance

29. Underlines the fact that the Committee formulates clear key performance indicators for its different administrative areas by formulating objectives and results and setting out the related number of human resources; asks the Committee to provide in the next annual activity report in addition to that very detailed information a consolidated version of the major objectives and the results achieved and to explore data visualisation options for more reader-friendly key performance indicator tables;

30. Notes that a compliance and effectiveness exercise was launched in 2019 to assess to what extent the Committee complies with the 16 internal control standards; notes that the 2019 compliance exercise showed that the overall state of implementation and effectiveness of the requirements remained satisfactory and stable as compared to 2018; notes, however, that areas for further improvement were identified including the alignment of the Committee's mission and organisational structure with new priorities, administrative cooperation between the Parliament and the Committee, further digitalisation of data storage and simplification of administrative processes, as well as an in-depth revamp of the existing business continuity plan arising from the experiences acquired during the current COVID-19 situation; calls on the Committee to report on the implementation of these much needed improvements in a follow-up to the 2019 discharge;

31. Notes that monitoring of the internal audit function is provided by the audit committee composed of one member per political group of the Committee's commission of financial and administrative affairs and one high-level external advisor; observes that in 2019 the audit committee held two meetings where the 2018 annual internal report and the 2020 work programme were presented and members were informed about the progress achieved with regard to ongoing audits and open recommendations as well as related risks; notes that 57 % of very important recommendations were closed after six months (target for 2019 to 2020: 75 %) and 100 % of very important recommendations were closed after 12 months (target for 2019 to 2020: 100 %); suggests that the Committee include a summary of the audit recommendations in its annual activity report;

32. Observes that the internal financial rules for the implementation of the Committee's budget were updated on 1 January 2019 by its decision No 0014/2018 and have been implemented throughout 2019; notes with satisfaction the inclusion of the operational agents as formal actors in the financial approval workflow and the appointment of managers responsible for operational management as authorising officers by sub-delegation;

33. Welcomes the fact that for the 2019 exercise all authorising officers by sub-delegation signed their individual declarations of assurance, that all reports on exceptions were mentioned in the relevant declarations of assurance, and that corrective measures are being implemented and monitored to prevent these exceptions from recurring;

34. Calls on the Committee to strengthen its efforts to analyse the situation with a view to attaining a fully paperless tendering environment for all procurement procedures; notes that this would make it necessary to acquire the public procurement management tool developed by the Commission's Joint Research Centre, alongside the development or acquisition of an improved back-office document management system; notes that the existing 'paperless workflow from invoice to payment' procedure was extended to a number of additional units and directorates in the course of 2019 and that the Committee's objective for the coming years is to further extend the scope of paperless workflows to other types of transactions, taking into account available IT resources;

Multilingualism

35. Appreciates the fact that based on the European Ombudsman's Practical recommendations for the EU administration on the use of official EU languages when communicating with the public (case SI/98/2018/DDJ), the Committee distributed these practical recommendations to all staff; notes that in 2019 the Committee also took the initiative of issuing a guide on staff complaints to the European Ombudsman in order to ensure an accurate follow-up;

36. Notes that the total cost of outsourced translation for the Committee and the EESC was EUR 6 043 592 in 2019 with the Committee's share amounting to EUR 2 492 830 and that the total cost of translation in-house would have been EUR 8 781 075 with the Committee's share amounting to EUR 3 621 974;

37. Requests the Committee to provide information on the on-going rationalisation process in the area of translation which mainly consists of a merger between different translation units; asks the Committee to report on any achieved efficiency gains made due to rationalisation and any related risks;

Interinstitutional cooperation

38. Emphasises the importance of interinstitutional cooperation and notes that the Committee paid approximately EUR 6 million under service level agreements made with other Union bodies in 2019; notes that this cooperation ensures synergies and is in addition to the joint services arrangement between the Committee and the EESC; notes that the Committee holds its plenary sessions in Parliament's and the Commission's premises, that it purchases interpreting services from Parliament and the Commission, and that it cooperates with several Union entities with respect to HR, IT and other administrative areas;

39. Appreciates the cooperation agreement of 5 February 2012 which remains in place between the Committee and Parliament and which covers political cooperation between Parliament and the Committee and administrative cooperation between Parliament, the Committee and the EESC; asks the Committee that it be informed on the outcome of the revision of this agreement;

40. Calls on the Committee to report on any achievements related to the negotiation of a new cooperation agreement with the Commission as the current cooperation agreement with the Commission (from 2005 with an addendum from 2007) ended on 31 December 2019, but was extended for one year;

41. Asks the Committee to report back on any control mechanism to ensure an efficient management of the joint services with the EESC; appreciates the importance of the administrative cooperation between the Committee and the EESC via the joint services, whereby the Committee and the EESC pool some 470 staff (of which around 170 staff belong to the Committee) and more than EUR 50 million yearly (of which some EUR 22 million come from the Committee), excluding salary related expenditure; notes that together with the concerned salary related expenditure, the yearly monetary value of the joint services arrangement exceeds EUR 100 million; notes that the negotiations for a new agreement for administrative cooperation with the EESC (the existing agreement has been entered into for the period 2016 to 2020) were postponed due to the COVID-19-crisis, something which added to the complexity of the changes of mandate of the Committee in early 2020 and the EESC in autumn 2020; notes that the Committee and the EESC agreed therefore to extend the term of the current agreement until 30 June 2021;

42. Invites the Committee, in light of the existing cooperation agreements between Parliament, the Committee and the EESC, to identify further potential synergies and savings, including other areas in which back-office functions could be shared;

43. Supports the Committee and the EESC in the view that, in the event of an extension of the current agreement or of a new agreement with Parliament, all outstanding issues must be settled such as the unbalanced situation for the Committee and the EESC, which transferred a total of 60 translators to Parliament (including 24 from the Committee) and in exchange only obtained the use of the services of the European Parliamentary Research Service; notes with concern that as a consequence the Committee and the EESC had to hire contract staff and outsourced their translation services which resulted in an effective budget reduction; is aware of the requests expressed by both the Committee and the EESC in the frame of the discharge procedure for the ongoing cooperation agreement to be respected so that the Committee and the EESC are compensated for the posts transferred to Parliament; asks the three involved parties to jointly report to Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control concerning the ongoing review of the agreement;

44. Underlines the Committee's acknowledgement in its written answers to Parliament that cooperation with Parliament in 2019 continued to build on the achievements of previous years and revealed a satisfactory progress on several levels such as the relations between the commissions of the Committee and the committees of Parliament, new ways of cooperation including contributions to implementation reports and fact-finding missions, and a successful and impactful cooperation through Parliament's Intergroup on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development; stresses that the Committee has requested that political cooperation continue to be further developed while respecting the autonomy and the specific approaches of each parliamentary committee and each commission of the Committee; notes that the cooperation with Parliament has established the foundation for a sustainable working relationship between the Committee and Parliament and that the Committee achieved intensified cooperation with the parliamentary committees and secured involvement in European Semester work, a reserved seat during parliamentary committee meetings, the use of the services of the European Parliamentary Research Service, joint projects and synergies on translation, opening of pathways between the buildings of Parliament and the buildings of the Committee and EESC, a service level agreement including provisions of interpretation services and technical support by Parliament, regular use of Parliament buildings in Brussels as well as of Parliament's Liaison Offices in the Member States for events and activities, intensified cooperation in the area of infomatics, mutual access to canteens, multiple cooperation mechanisms to ensure a coherent approach and create synergies in the field of information and communication and, where necessary, legal advice in technical or administrative matters from Parliament's Legal Service;

45. Notes that the cooperation with Parliament at the administrative level is successful; agrees on the need to further enhance political cooperation with respect to annual and multi-annual programming, to the joint declaration of Parliament, the Council and the Commission on legislative priorities and to the monitoring of the annual work programme; supports the Committee's concrete recommendations to develop a more systematic approach to political cooperation given the importance of the Committee as the representative of regions and cities in the Union; appreciates the participation of the Committee in the Joint Committee on Equal Opportunities;

46. Stresses the importance of promoting the involvement of regional and local authorities in the shaping of Union policies via enhanced cooperation with the Commission and the co-legislators;

47. Asks the Committee to be kept informed of any improvements made with respect to the efficiency of administrative processes, which seem to be an unavoidable necessity due to an ever-increasing workload and a rapidly changing world; reiterates the necessity of on-going reforms in order to ensure that the Committee is well equipped to respond to future challenges;

48. Recognises and welcomes the Committee's involvement in Parliament's electoral campaign in 2019 by ensuring the mobilisation of all its internal and external networks in promoting both the 'This time I'm voting' ground game and the 'Choose your future' online video, as well as through the Committee's social media outreach; encourages further cooperation activities for the purpose of creating synergies in the field of communication;

Environmental dimension

49. Notes the Committee's efforts in the context of the environmental management system as regards the lowering of the carbon footprint and reducing plastic, food and paper waste; agrees that lowering the carbon footprint is among the most important objectives for the coming years; calls on the Committee to pay due attention to the energy mix of its sources of electricity and encourages the procurement of electricity generated by wind, solar, bio and hydroplants; encourages the Committee to participate in projects in areas which are related with other Union entities and to elaborate a comprehensive plan for the Committee to implement the principles and recommendations presented in the European Green Deal, with the general objective of becoming climate neutral by 2030;

Ethics and integrity policy

50. Underlines the fact that on 5 December 2019 the Committee adopted a code of conduct for its members laying down a detailed procedure in the event of alleged harassment of a member of staff by a Committee member, which is largely based on Parliament's Bureau's Decision of 2 July 2018 on harassment complaints; welcomes the fact that the code of conduct includes a number of sanctions in order to ensure its observance and that the Committee has set up an advisory board on harassment; asks the Committee to present a report on the implementation of the code of conduct;

51. Observes that the code of conduct is mentioned in the members' page of the Committee's website with link to a dedicated page; notes that the code of conduct includes provisions that specifically aim to avoid instances of conflicts of interests, including the obligation to submit a declaration of financial interests;

52. Welcomes the opening of a dialogue with different stake-holders in order to review the current internal decision No 362/2010 of 29 November 2010 concerning psychological and sexual harassment at work on the basis of a proposal for a changed framework to combat harassment which aims to broaden the scope of the matter by including prevention measures and means of conflict resolution, as well as reinforcing the principle of zero tolerance towards harassment, including courses on preventing harassment; calls on the Committee to establish a new framework on harassment as soon as possible and to report on its follow-up actions to Parliament;

53. Notes that no new cases of whistleblowing have been submitted in 2019; welcomes the fact that at the end of 2019 the Committee launched a survey on awareness of staff ethics, containing in particular numerous questions on the awareness of staff regarding whistleblowing procedures, and that the outcome has been followed up in 2020; notes that decision No 508/2015 defines the safe channels at the disposal of members of staff to address whistleblowing reports internally to any manager of the Committee of their choice or directly to the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF); notes that before launching such a procedure, guidance may be sought from the persons responsible for ethical and statutory matters;

54. Asks the Committee to follow the good example of other bodies in publishing on its website a chapter on ethics, consisting of rules to prevent, identify and avoid potential conflicts of interests and which are applicable to all members and staff of the Committee; expresses its interest in receiving updates on the ethical framework and related training courses on public ethics, including for incoming staff;

55. Asks the Committee to start the procedure for joining the interinstitutional agreement on the mandatory Transparency Register, which was recently reached between Parliament, the Council and the Commission; recalls the importance of a high level of transparency with respect to lobbying meetings which might influence members and staff in their advisory role to the Union institutions;

56. Reiterates what the Court stated in its Special Report 13/2019, the ethical frameworks of the audited EU institutions: scope for improvement, namely that ethical conduct in public affairs contributes to more sound financial management and to increased public trust, and that unethical behaviour by staff and members of the Union institutions and bodies attracts high levels of public interest and reduces trust in Union institutions;

57. Appreciates the progress on Mr McCoy's case in response to the 2018 Discharge; notes the work done by successive rapporteurs and shadow rapporteurs for other Institutions who opened the long-stalled dialogue; recalls that the third invalidity committee unanimously confirmed that the former internal auditor was invalided out on occupational grounds and that, subsequently, on 26 June 2019 the Committee formally endorsed this conclusion; notes that pursuant to article 78(5) of the staff regulations Mr McCoy was reimbursed in July 2019 in respect of all his contributions to the pension scheme from the date he started receiving the invalidity allowance (1 July 2007) to the day before he started receiving retirement pension (31 July 2010);

58. Recalls that, based on the 2017 discharge resolution, the appointment of a Member of Parliament as mediator took place and that all parties de facto entered into a mediation process to bring the dispute between the Committee and former internal auditor, Mr McCoy, to an end with the objective of reaching an amicable settlement; the first phase of mediation led to the signature of a Joint Statement on 4 December 2020 on the principles governing the resolution of Mr McCoy's bona fide whistle-blower case; notes that this concluded the non-financial part of the settlement; recalls that the second phase of the mediation, focusing on the financial settlement, has also been launched and is currently under way;

59. Appreciates the exchange held in the context of the 2019 discharge procedure on 10 November 2020 with the mediator, Mr McCoy and a representative of the Committee; recalls that Mr McCoy and the Committee were invited to a meeting of Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control based on a suggestion by the 2018 rapporteur for the Other Institutions and approved by the coordinators of the political groups; underlines the importance of de-escalating the situation and reconciling the positions of Mr McCoy and of the Committee; welcomes the mediator's suggestion of a meeting between the president of the Committee and Mr McCoy as a starting point for reconciliation before the start of the negotiations;

60. Welcomes the letter of 10 November 2020 sent to the chairperson of Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control by the chairperson of the Committee's committee on financial and administrative affairs confirming the readiness of the president of the Committee to meet Mr McCoy; welcomes the follow-up meetings between the mediator, the 2019 discharge rapporteur, the former internal auditor and the Committee's representatives; warmly welcomes the letter of 4 December 2020 announcing that the first phase of the procedure for an agreement was concluded with a joint statement signed by the Committee's representatives and Mr McCoy; encourage the parties to find an agreement to settle the financial part and reminds its disposal to support the negotiation; appreciates the efforts made by all parties, acknowledges that an important first step was taken and believes an agreement should be reached soon;

61. Welcomes the fact that the president and the secretary-general of the Committee readily made a firm commitment to reach an amicable settlement and thus conclude the case; notes that on 4 December 2020 with the contribution of Parliament's mediator, Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control, Mr McCoy and the president and the secretary-general of the Committee concluded a joint statement on the principles governing the resolution of the case in line with Parliament's demands since 2004 and that the Committee, with Mr McCoy's consent, have published the joint statement on the Committee's website;

62. Acknowledges that in the joint statement, the Committee in particular accepts without reservation the OLAF report and its conclusions and acknowledges its past mistakes and shortcomings; recognises, like Parliament, that Mr McCoy was right to take his concerns directly to Parliament and that it should have done more to comply with Parliament's 2004 demands, including that Mr McCoy must suffer no adverse consequences as a result of having reported wrongdoing; recognises Mr McCoy as a bona fide whistleblower as conferred politically in 2004 by Parliament and is sorry that Mr McCoy was not protected despite having offered him the protection as a whistleblower in 2003; sincerely regrets the considerable harm the Committee has caused Mr McCoy, the way in which it treated him and its insufficient observance of its duty of care; accepts that the case should never have been allowed to remain unresolved for more than seventeen years;

63. Notes with satisfaction that the president and the secretary-general of the Committee has presented their formal apology to Mr McCoy on these grounds and for the Committee's mishandling of his case, that the Committee and Mr McCoy have committed to settle the financial aspects of the settlement with support from Parliament's legal service and under the political guidance of Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control, and that the Committee has reiterated its full commitment to the rules and principles of whistleblower protection and, more particularly, to the inalienable principles of equity and fairness, has drawn the necessary conclusions from Mr McCoy's case and has taken all necessary steps in respect of its internal governance to ensure that such a situation cannot arise again; urges all parties to reach a financial agreement as soon as possible;

64. Acknowledges the efforts made by the negotiating teams to reconcile the two parties and commends them for brokering a potential basis for a fair, just and appropriately honourable resolution to this dispute;

65. Urges all parties to conclude an agreement on a fair financial settlement as a follow-up to the joint statement without further undue delay; recognises the sincerity of the request by the Committee to Parliament's Legal Service for its assistance in concluding such financial settlement;

66. Notes that the Committee was originally established to address important issues, as about three quarters of Union legislation is implemented at local or regional level for which reason it was necessary for local and regional representatives to have a say in the development of new Union laws; further notes that its original mission was to close the widening gap between the public and the process of European integration by involving regional representation;

67. Encourages the Committee to consider preparing a plan for reorganisation and streamlining of internal processes in order to achieve a closer cooperation with Parliament and the application of its knowledge in a more effective way;

68. Welcomes that the Committee publishes on its website annual reports on the impact assessments of its opinions since 2010; invites the Committee, furthermore, to set clear and measurable key performance indicators for the coming years in order to optimise its functioning.