RESOLUTION (EU) 2020/1985 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

of 14 May 2020

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 2018, Section VI — European Economic and Social Committee

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 2018, Section VI — European Economic and Social Committee,

— having regard to the in camera presentation by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) to Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control of 3 February 2020 on the outcome of an investigation by OLAF relating to the European Economic and Social Committee;

— having regard the Report of the European Ombudsman on dignity at work in the EU institutions and agencies: SI/2/2018/AMF,

— 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 (A9-0078/2020),

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. Welcomes the conclusion of the Court of Auditors (the 'Court') that the payments as a whole for the year ended 31 December 2018 for the administrative expenditure of the European Economic and Social Committee (the 'Committee') were free from material error and that the examined supervisory and control systems were effective;

2. Notes that the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) from July until November 2018 received allegations about harassment concerning a senior member of the Committee, the president of the Employer's Group (Group I) since April 2013, from five different sources and that on 6 November 2018 OLAF decided to open an investigation;

3. Notes that one case of harassment was reported in 2018 through the formal procedure (article 24 of the Staff Regulations and article 12§1 of the Committee's decision on the prevention of harassment); reminds that the administrative inquiry has been concluded and a minimal disciplinary sanction has been imposed on the person accused although all possibilities of appeal have not yet been exhausted; notes that three additional cases of harassment, to some extent connected to each other, were reported in 2018 through seven whistleblowing reports; notes that two administrative inquiries were launched and the matters were referred to OLAF in January 2019;

4. Notes that on 17 January 2020 OLAF addressed its report and recommendations to the president of the Committee as provided in the cooperation agreement between the Committee and OLAF; expresses concern that OLAF made findings of harassment against two staff members, of improper behaviour (serious misconduct) against one staff member and one member of the Committee, and of misconduct against other staff members, and that it also decided to refer the matter to the Belgian authorities;

5. Deplores the findings of OLAF as regards psychological harassment, grave misconduct and inappropriate behaviour by the president of Group 1 towards his subordinates between 2013 and 2018; notes that under Belgian law harassment constitutes a criminal offence; notes, furthermore, that Article 4 of the code of conduct for the members of the Committee on dignity has been breached and that such behaviour is not compatible with the Union values of respect for and protection of human dignity within the work place as provided for in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union; calls on the Committee to report to the discharge authority in a timely manner on what it has done to follow up on the recommendations by OLAF;

6. Expects the Committee to duly inform the discharge authority before September 2020 of the measures taken to follow up OLAF's recommendations and to rectify the wrongdoings;

7. Calls on the Committee to consistently apply Article 8 of its code of conduct without any delay, namely by starting the necessary procedure against persons concerned and by promptly referring such matters to the advisory committee on the conduct of members;

8. Stresses its concern with respect to the current work environment within the Committee, particularly in Group I, and asks the Committee to take the necessary measures to establish the respectful and trustworthy environment necessary for the personal wellbeing and professional development of the staff; further reminds the Committee that a bad work environment causes inefficiency, stress and lack of productivity;

9. Notes that on 22 January 2020 Group I proceeded to the election of its current president as candidate to become president of the Committee from October 2020 when the presidency of the Committee is to be held by Group I for two-and-a-half years;

10. Recalls the Report of the European Ombudsman on dignity at work in the EU institutions and agencies: SI/2/2018/AMF, which states with respect to high-ranking personnel that individuals 'are particularly vulnerable to harassment where there is a power imbalance between the parties involved. This can be mitigated through more demanding rules for high-ranking personnel, who are not covered by the Staff Regulations, such as commissioners, judges, members of the Court of Auditors, members of the Economic and Social Committee and so on. These could include aggravated disciplinary measures, such as compulsory retirement or removal of pension rights. High-ranking personnel should be informed of all anti-harassment rules and policies at the beginning of their mandates in a comprehensive manner and at regular intervals.';

11. Requests that the Committee put in place and implement an action plan to actively prevent and tackle harassment in the working environment, to raise awareness of harassment and to foster a culture of zero tolerance with regard to harassment;

12. Calls on the Committee to improve measures allowing staff to make formal harassment complaints, to organise regular training for confidential counsellors and to set up a pool of independent investigators which the Committee can call on during formal harassment investigations;

13. Notes with satisfaction the examples of good practice from the Court's anti-harassment policy which has strong disciplinary measures for culpable members, such as compulsory retirement or denial of pension rights, and calls on the Committee to emulate those examples;

14. Regrets, as a general observation, that chapter 10 'Administration' of the Court's Annual Report has a rather limited scope and conclusions, notwithstanding the fact that Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) Heading 5 'Administration' is considered to be low risk;

15. Notes that the Court selected a sample of 45 transactions from the MFF Heading 5 'Administration' of all Union institutions and bodies; notes that the sample was designed to be representative of the range of spending under Heading 5, which represents 6,3 % of the Union budget; notes that the Court's work indicates administrative expenditure as low risk; considers, however, the amount of transactions selected in relation to the 'other institutions' to be insufficient and asks the Court to increase the number of transactions to be examined by at least 10 %;

16. Notes that in 2018 the Committee's budget amounted to EUR 135 630 905, compared to EUR 133 807 338 in 2017, corresponding to an increase of 1,36 %; notes an overall rate of implementation of 98,66 %, compared to 96,5 % in 2017 and 97,2 % in 2016;

17. Welcomes the overall prudent and sound financial management of the Committee in the 2018 budget period; welcomes the fact that the commitment rate for Title 1 'Expenditure relating to persons working with the Committee' was 98,94 % and for Title 2 'Buildings, equipment and miscellaneous operating expenditure' 97,97 %;

18. Observes with concern that the final appropriations for travel and subsistence allowances for Members are slightly increasing, to EUR 20 247 625 in 2018 (compared to EUR 19 819 612 in 2017 and EUR 19 561 194 in 2016), despite the reduction in numbers of meetings; acknowledges that the related unused appropriations only amount to 1,05 %;

19. Welcomes the Committee's Decision No 2018/C 466/02 of 10 December 2018, according to which the Committee's members are reimbursed upon presentation of the supporting documents the actual costs of their travel tickets up to a maximum of the discounted business class (preferably economy class or similar) air fare; notes that the current system, which is based on actual costs, is in line with both the relevant Council decision and with the system in place at Parliament; appreciates that the Committee encourages shared transport solutions such as public buses and car-sharing as well as hiring coaches when this proves to be the most cost-efficient solution;

20. Notes that in 2018 the budget group of the Committee focused in particular on assessing how to control spending and improve forecasting for the budget item covering members' travel and subsistence allowances and that as a result, a call for tender on 'Analysis and proposal for improvements of the current projection system concerning cost reimbursement of EESC members, delegates and experts' was launched in October 2018; calls on the Committee to inform Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control on any results achieved;

21. Observes that the appropriations carried forward (EUR 8 204 796) from 2018 to 2019 (compared to EUR 9 232 069 from 2017 to 2018) amount to 6,05 % of the total appropriations, which is again mainly due to the budget lines 'Members of the institution and delegates', 'buildings' and 'data processing'; deplores the fact that many appropriations automatically carried forward from 2017 to 2018 were particularly overestimated; reminds the Committee that it is essential to make a realistic budget adjustment in accordance with real needs; recalls that excessive overestimation or underestimation indicates poor budgetary planning and entails negative pressure on the sound and prudent financial management;

22. Stresses that the Committee's budget is purely administrative; notes that the Committee assessed how to apply the principles of performance-based budgeting to administrative appropriations only; welcomes the Committee's initiative to work together with other institutions to establish a set of interinstitutional guidelines on the implementation of performance-based budgeting for institutions that have only administrative expenditure;

23. Recognises that in 2018 a decision on internal control standards was updated, formalising the existence of an internal control process within the Committee, including the appointment of an internal control coordinator; notes that the Committee launched an exercise for compliance with the 16 internal control standards by means of an ad hoc questionnaire, followed by a report, which was the basis for the authorising officer to decide on a catalogue of measures for 2019 aiming to further improve compliance with the internal control standards; welcomes the training and awareness raising taking place in this context;

24. Notes the fact that salaries make up approximately half the Committee's budget; welcomes the internal audit on salary payments which was finalised in 2018 and is to provide assurance that procedures had improved after an audit carried out in 2010; notes that the audit found the salary payment process to be stable and not to pose any undue risks; notes the agreed action plan which had already been implemented partly by the end of 2018 with all the other elements scheduled for implementation by the end of 2019;

25. Observes that in 2018 the Committee adopted a total of 215 opinions and reports (compared to 155 in 2017); welcomes the efforts made to increase its overall efficiency; specifically welcomes all the efforts, in particular in 2018, which led to a vision to shape the Committee's future IT environment to be compatible with modern administration and to envisage a digitally transformed, user focused and data-driven Committee for the next 10 years; notes that currently only 3 % of the Committee's budget is devoted to IT products; notes that the implementation of the digital strategy of the Committee will need extra resources;

26. Acknowledges that artificial intelligence (AI) will change the labour market and displace a big proportion of jobs currently existing; encourages the Committee to follow this issue closely; supports the work done by the Committee on AI by issuing an opinion and organising a first stakeholder summit on AI in June 2018 with the Commission in order to stress the importance for the Union of ensuring that AI is safe, unbiased and in line with Union values;

27. Welcomes the Committee's efforts to increase the data protection and cybersecurity of the Committee; further welcomes the cooperation with the Computer Emergency Response Team for the EU Institutions, bodies and agencies and the active participation in the IT Interinstitutional Committee Security subgroup;

28. Stresses that a service level agreement between the Commission and the Committee on human resources, including training, was concluded in 2018 and has increased the transparency and predictability of costs related to IT training as requested in Parliament's 2017 discharge resolution [1]; notes with concern, however, that the advantage of increased transparency is partly offset by a substantial increase in prices charged by the Commission and asks the Committee to analyse the situation together with the Commission in the interests of finding improvements;

29. Points out that the establishment plan approved by the budgetary authority confirmed a staff increase from 665 posts in 2017 to 668 in 2018 (compared to 727 in 2013); recognises that a 5 % reduction is much more difficult to absorb when applied to a relatively small establishment plan because of the need to maintain certain key functions in terms of business continuity and that such an overall reduction rate requires a greater effort from smaller institutions;

30. Notes the measures to implement the whistleblowing decision of 2016, such as the adoption of an internal decision on ethics counsellors; acknowledges that three additional members of staff were selected in 2018 to join the active team of trained counsellors; notes the role of the ethics counsellors to advise and assist members of staff in order to help them fulfil their obligations in the best way possible regarding the reporting of serious misconduct (whistleblowing), as stated in Parliament's 2016 discharge resolution [2];

31. Notes with concern that the number of the requests of assistance addressed to the ethics counsellors increased from 25 in 2017 to 42 in 2018 and stresses with particular concern that 33 of such requests were from women while the number of requests from men remained stable at nine;

32. Notes all the measures undertaken to strengthen the effectiveness of the anti-harassment policy, such as training on specific topics, opportunities for the confidential counsellors to network, and regular supervision by an external consultant; notes that a revision of the current decision on harassment is under consideration to ensure better synergies with other relevant regulations, such as on whistleblowing; notes that the course on ethics and integrity is compulsory for all staff and covers standards of behaviour in the workplace, including what harassment is and how to deal with it; deeply regrets that all these measures have failed to avoid the related cases of harassment and to protect the victims; reminds the Committee that a proactive, real and urgent protection (including against threats, blackmail and bribery attempts) of all of the victims and whistleblowers must be one of the key priorities of these measures; calls on the Committee to reinforce and improve the measures undertaken until now and above all effectively protect all of the victims; asks the Committee to report back to the Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control in this regard;

33. Notes with appreciation the cooperation between the Committee and OLAF; observes that both institutions signed administrative arrangements in 2016 which set out the procedure to be followed for the handling of fraud cases; further notes that in July 2019 the Committee's president and secretary-general met OLAF's director-general in order to create better synergies and ensure more efficient exchange of information;

34. Notes that the new code of conduct for members, which is annexed to the Committee's new rules of procedure that entered into force in March 2019, for the first time contains penalties for members involved in situations where a member does not fulfil his or her obligations according to the code of conduct; regrets that such penalties are neither sufficiently severe nor aligned with the recommendations of the European Ombudsman; recalls that using Union funds to defend the institutional reputation or members subject to an adverse judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) or by courts of the Member States is a misuse of public funds and recalls that institutional legal services are to be used for the purpose of defending the institution only, not to defend the interests of individuals; asks the Committee to urgently strengthen the code of conduct for members in order particularly to add penalties that may be more effective and dissuasive; notes that an advisory committee on the conduct of members has been established and that this committee will give any member who so requests guidance on the interpretation and implementation of the code of conduct, and advise the president of the Committee on possible steps to be taken and on alleged breaches of the code of conduct; strongly recommends that harassment training is made available to all members, as it has been the case in Parliament since the beginning of the current parliamentary term;

[1] OJ L 249, 27.9.2019, p. 118.
[2] OJ L 248, 3.10.2018, p. 134.

35. Recalls that the Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control asked for regular updates of the Committee's ethics and integrity framework; welcomes that in 2018 preparations started for a campaign on 'Respect@work', meant to foster respectful workplace relations for all, which among other actions will feed into a revision of the ethics and integrity framework in 2019; calls on the Committee to report back in the next annual activity report;

36. Recalls that the legal service of the Committee was substantially weakened for four years from March 2010 when the head of the legal service was dismissed with immediate effect from his duties after having denounced serious irregularities and illicit pressures by the secretary-general at the time; also recalls that this position was vacant for three-and-a-half years, that the European Civil Service Tribunal found against the Committee in this case (judgment in Case F-41/10 RENV, *Bermejo Garde v European Economic and Social Committee* ([3])), that the Committee had to pay more than EUR 100 000 and that only in 2014 a new head of the legal service was appointed and the legal service reinforced with five lawyers;

37. Is very concerned about the recent changes which may again weaken the legal service of the Committee, including that it since 1 January 2020 is attached directly to the secretary-general as the only legal service among the Union institutions, that since September 2019 it has lost one of its five lawyers on a permanent basis, that some staff members, including the head of unit, have been included in mobility instead of being considered specialised staff as in the other institutions and that it has suffered a drastic reduction in the number of formal consultations;

38. Stresses the importance of having a strong and independent legal service, taking into account that since their creation, the Union institutions have provided themselves with internal legal services whose main functions are legal advice and representation and defence before the CJEU; therefore asks the Committee to ensure that its legal service has a sufficient number of staff to perform its duties and is able to keep its independence; asks the Committee to eliminate all measures that could weaken the legal service in the exercise of its corresponding activities and functions; also reminds the Committee of the importance of consulting the legal service on the Committee's decisions in order to assure they comply with the law and to avoid making serious mistakes and subsequent legal, long and onerous proceedings;

39. Fully regrets public allegations caused by the recruitment procedure for the new secretary-general of the Committee; notes the arguments raised by the secretary-general in the answers to Parliament's questions for the 2018 discharge; stresses the importance of strictly ensuring the accomplishment of complete transparency in all the phases of the entire the whole procedure (publication, selection, appointment and establishment) without any exceptions as set out in the Committee's rules of procedure and in the Staff Regulations in order to comply with them and also to avoid any reputational risk, not only for the Committee but for all the Union institutions;

40. Welcomes the efforts made to increase the Committee's visibility, by both strengthening its relations with the media and putting the focus on online communication to further remove language-related and disability-related barriers; highlights in relation to social media communication the accompanying training policy and on-demand tailored coaching sessions for both the members and the staff of the Committee; notes the slight reduction in the number of press releases in 2018 (approximately 60 compared to 70 in 2017) as part of a strategy aiming to develop the format of 'web stories' in order to have a more focused communication on the most important topics of the Committee; asks the Committee to report back to Parliament on its experiences in this respect;

41. Notes that the Committee implemented a wide range of communication activities to mark its 60th anniversary in May 2018; welcomes the fact that the Committee received 9 419 visitors in 2018 (compared to 7 820 in 2017) and that the traditional Open Day on 5 May attracted some additional 2 888 visitors (compared to 2 700 in 2017); notes that the Committee's plenaries which are web-streamed has a potential reach of between three and eight million people; notes that the overall online interaction, such as retweets, 'likes' and replies, has been increasing and has reached between 680 and 1 840 mentions per plenary;

42. Notes that the appropriations for translation outsourcing increased (20,2 %, in 2018, slightly above the 20 % target, compared to 17,1 % in 2017 and 16,61 % in 2016) in the context of the cooperation agreement signed with Parliament and the resulting reduction in translation staff; notes further that the total cost of outsourced translation in 2018 was EUR 4 417 613 compared to EUR 7 208 710 that would have been the total cost of in-house translation;

([3]) Judgment of the Civil Service Tribunal (First Chamber) of 2 June 2016, *Bermejo Garde v European Economic and Social Committee*, F-41/10 RENV, ECLI:EU:F:2016:123.

43. Invites the Committee to continue its rationalisation measures in the area of translation;

44. Notes that the administrative cooperation agreement entered into between the Committee, the Committee of the Regions and Parliament in 2014 came to end on 31 December 2019; notes that to date the 2014 agreement has not been renegotiated or extended; is of the opinion that the 2014 agreement was very unbalanced for the Committee and the Committee of the Regions (the 'Committees'), that transferred a total of 60 translators to Parliament (36 from the Committee) and, in exchange obtained only the use of the services of the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS); notes with concern that as a consequence the Committees had to hire contract staff and outsource their translation service; notes with concern that to compensate for the reduction in translation staff, Parliament has provided additional funds (EUR 1 200 000 from 2015 to 2016) to the Committees to cover the outsourcing of the translation services and that these funds can be reallocated to other policy areas if they are not fully used for outsourced translation (the Committee used this reallocation possibility in the last three years); is of the opinion that these circumstances are not in line with the criteria of overall prudent and sound financial management and should be reviewed in the event of an extension of the present agreement or in the negotiation of a new agreement; recognises that, from a political point of view, the agreement must be updated to face current challenges, such as the new MFF or the new cohesion policy rules; recognises the Committees' good cooperation in promoting citizen's participation in the 2019 European elections;

45. Recognises the follow-up to the Committee's 2016 staff survey on psychosocial risks at work by the launch of several initiatives, such as workshops for managers on absence management, conflict management and how to handle poor performance; also welcomes the mentoring system for new colleagues and actions to increase the wellbeing and commitment of staff; notes that the staff absence rate seems to have reached its peak in 2017 (5,5 %), and that it decreased slightly to 5,35 % in 2018 (compared to 4 % in 2015); notes with concern, however, the increase in long-term sick leave among the Committee's heads of unit; calls on the Committee to report back on all achievements relating to the reduction of the staff absence rate;

46. Welcomes the ongoing progress towards achieving geographical balance for the Committee's managers, in particular with respect to the Member States that joined the Union in or after 2004; notes with regard to gender balance that the Committee now has a higher proportion of female than male managers (52 % in 2018, 41,4 % in 2017 and 37,5 % in 2016); notes that 80 % of the colleagues requesting part-time work were women in 2018 even though the right is the same for men and women; welcomes the fact that the Committee regularly raises awareness of the available working patterns;

47. Welcomes the Committee's efforts to build a more diverse and inclusive work environment and culture by taking actions in favour of people with disabilities, such as making the intranet and website digitally accessible to persons with visual impairment, publishing a brochure called 'Access Able Brussels' to provide all necessary information for newcomers with disabilities moving to Brussels, and hosting the Inter COPEC conference dedicated entirely to disability issues;

48. Recalls the necessity of developing a long-term human resources policy framework which promotes work-life balance, lifelong guidance and career development, gender balance, teleworking, non-discrimination, geographical balance and the recruitment and integration of people with disabilities;

49. Recognises that by means of an administrative cooperation agreement, the Committees have set out a large number of procedures for collaboration between their services and have also established and organised joint services in which both human and financial resources from the two Committees are pooled together (namely translation and logistics); welcomes that the internal audit service of the two Committees collaborate closely concerning the joint services under the provisions of the cooperation agreement; encourages the Committee to extend its administrative cooperation agreement with the Committee of the Regions beyond 2019;

50. Welcomes the annual savings amounting to EUR 11,8 million as regards infrastructure and EUR 0,72 million as regards rent, maintenance, consumables and staff due to the fact that the Committees are sharing resources in these areas; also welcomes the fact that the annual budgetary savings as regards IT due to the cooperation between the Committees amount to approximately EUR 5 million; notes that an example of synergies through the cooperation with Parliament, which creates savings in terms of staff costs amounting to EUR 3,3 million (at 2016 salary levels), is the Committees' use of EPRS (36 Committee posts were transferred to the EPRS for this purpose);

51. Calls on the Committee to analyse further the situation in order to identify additional areas for joint services with the Committee of the Regions; highlights that this kind of interinstitutional cooperation can significantly reduce the overall expenditure of the Committee; calls on the Committee to inform Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control on any results achieved;

52. Notes that the cooperation agreement between the Committees, signed in 2016, establishes a firm legal framework for long-term, efficient and effective cooperation and demonstrates that the Committees are acting in partnership while respecting each other's powers and prerogatives; notes that the agreement ended on 31 December 2019 and that it was decided to extend it for one year while a new agreement is being negotiated; asks the Committees to make the necessary efforts to conclude a new agreement as soon as possible in order to allow further synergies and savings;

53. Recalls that once again the Committees dedicated less than 3 % of its total budget to IT and that IT projects and equipment have suffered from structurally underfinancing for several years; notes with concern that in order to address their backlog in IT projects and systems, the Committees continue to use mopping-up exercises at the end of the year to finance IT projects; asks the Committees to implement as soon as possible the new digital strategy and multiannual IT expenditure plan;

54. Notes that the agreement between the Committees and the Commission on the exchange of the Commission's VMA building for the Committees BEL68/TRE 74 buildings was signed on 28 August 2019; notes that the exchange will become effective on 16 September 2022; notes with concern that the main priority identified by the Committees' buildings policy is the geographical concentration of the buildings; notes with concern that this exchange results in a loss of office space of 10 440 m^2 for the Committees and, thus, a need to find extra offices to accommodate around 200 members of staff after the exchange, which cannot be entirely offset by alternative measures in the short-term, such as a more intensive use of space in the other buildings or an increased use of teleworking, but will necessitate the purchase of another adjacent building to compensate for this reduction; notes also the need to renovate the VMA building in the short to medium term; fears the consequences that this agreement will have not only for the finances of the Committee but also for the wellbeing of the staff concerned; regrets that the legal service has not been consulted on a matter of such scope and importance for the Committee;

55. Notes that the Committees have recently established a joint working group for the purpose of preparing a further analysis in order to find adequate solutions; notes that another working group is tasked with reflecting on new ways of working; stresses that the well-being, manner of work and work space of staff must suffer no negative consequences arising from the exchange of buildings; welcomes that the administration of the Committee is keeping all stakeholders informed via staff meetings and through the management of the concerned services and will take into consideration the concerns and suggestions put forward; calls on the Committees to inform Parliament's Committees on Budgetary Control and on Budgets on any results achieved;

56. Expresses serious concerns about the confirmation of the presence of asbestos in critical places of the VMA building including the parking area; deplores the fact that an inventory realised by a specialised external contractor was carried out in September 2019 only one month after the signature of the agreement with the Commission; deplores the fact that the agreement was signed without informing all stakeholders in due time about the possibly presence of asbestos in the VMA building; also deplores the fact that members and staff have not been informed about the situation and asks the Committee to remedy the situation in an adequate and effective way;

57. Notes that the Committees received an asbestos-safe certificate for the VMA building in September 2019 and that this certificate specifies the building contains asbestos without risk for normal use of the building; taking into account especially that the next use of the building will not be normal use, but a situation of construction, is deeply concerned about the future developments on the issue;

58. Notes that the effects of prolonged and unsafe asbestos exposure on human health are well documented and are always a source of concern and alarm among the population in general and therefore asks the Committees to carry out a policy of total and proactive transparency and information about the management of the situation before and after the effective occupation of the VMA building while at the same time avoiding alarmism;

59. Is concerned that 19,56 % (2 835) of the payments with a payment time of 30 days were delayed (with an average payment delay of 46,12 days); calls on the Committee to strengthen its efforts to respect the payment deadlines set in the Financial Regulation;

60. Welcomes the fact that the rate of unused slots of interpretation services decreased over the last years (2,61 % in 2018, 3,6 % in 2017 and 4,38 % in 2016); acknowledges the measures implemented throughout 2018 and encourages the Committee to keep its positive trend towards fewer cancellations of interpretation services;

61. Appreciates the Committee's intention to further improve transparency and facilitate access to the Committee's documents based on an interinstitutional meeting on transparency held in Luxembourg on 25 September 2018; notes that the Committee has launched an exercise to take advantage of the best practices of other Union institutions and bodies resulting in an action plan to be launched in 2019 covering topics such as its rules of procedure, its code of conduct for members, creation of a transparency register and access to documents;

62. Notes that the European Ombudsman in June 2017 issued the 'Recommendation of the European Ombudsman concerning the alleged failure by the European Economic and Social Committee to ensure that a member declared all relevant interests', resulting in the Committee amending its rules of procedure in order to reflect the changes requested by the European Ombudsman and that the amended rules of procedure entered into force on 15 March 2019; notes that the European Ombudsman came to a conclusion about the absence of maladministration in an inquiry regarding a complaint related to a selection procedure in 2018;

63. Notes that the declarations of interests for the president and the vice-presidents of the Committee are available and accessible on the Committee's members' internet pages; notes that following the amended rules of procedure members must upon appointment draw up a declaration of any interest, financial or other, that might have an impact on their work at the Committee; notes that these declarations are also made available to the general public on the Committee's website; notes that members have to confirm explicitly the validity of the content of their declarations at least once a year and make revisions as soon as any change in their situation occurs;

64. Notes that members are not obliged to declare the address of the organisation or company by which they are remunerated; notes, however, that upon taking office and in the case of any changes members are required to complete and sign declarations of interests; notes that 25 members have provided the administration with a registered address in Belgium;

65. Notes that the Committee does not have the intention to change the system of requiring one signature to confirm the presence of Members in meetings to a system requiring two signatures, one at the beginning of the meeting and one at the end of the meeting; asks the Committee, in order to improve its working methods, to further study practices and experiences at Parliament and other Union institutions and bodies regarding the presence record and will benchmark best practices; asks the Committee to report back on any achievements in its next annual activity report;

66. Notes the Committee's work done related to the Decision of the European Ombudsman in the case 1306/2014/OV to prepare guidelines on managing conflicts of interests at work with the aim of providing guidance in cases where staff members need to perform overlapping functions when handling a single subject, which is particularly the case in relation to staff representation activities;

67. Welcomes the Committee's policy relating to 'revolving doors', which includes following up on the external activities carried out by its former senior officials; notes that the Committee publishes a related report every year;

68. Notes that the Committee established a group in 2017 to monitor developments with respect to the United Kingdom's decision to withdraw from the Union and assesses the need for reactions or positions by the Committee; notes that on the assumption that the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Union would take place, a total of EUR 318 600 was deducted from the 2019 budget and an additional amount of EUR 173 062 from the 2020 budget to reflect the 'evident changes' to Members' travel costs and to the co-financing of IT equipment for members;

69. Reiterates the need to streamline, accelerate and improve the discharge procedure; proposes in this regard to set a deadline for the submission of the annual activity reports of 31 March of the year following the accounting year; regrets that this deadline was not respected for the 2018 annual activity report as requested in the 2017 discharge resolution; welcomes the Committee's readiness to follow this best practice which would provide the discharge institution with time for a more in-depth and better conducted discharge procedure;

70. Notes that the second ad hoc group on the future of the Committee with a focus on how to rationalise the Committee's internal bodies presented its follow-up report at the end of 2017; notes that the bureau of the Committee decided in January 2018 to reduce the number of Members sitting on a large number of the Committee's internal bodies and to limit the number of their meetings held each year; notes that the bureau decided to refocus the remits of some of the Committee structures; asks the Committee to provide Parliament with clarifications on savings in connection with this modernisation in order to boost transparency and accountability;

71. Welcomes the efforts of the Committee to promote the circular economy through its opinion and, in cooperation with the Commission, through the European circular economy stakeholders' platform compiling initiatives and best practices;

72. Supports the efforts made by the Committee to decrease its environmental footprint; notes with satisfaction a slight decrease in the consumption of electricity (3 %) and paper (17 %) and of office waste (3 %); observes, however, the increase in the consumption of gas (5 %) and water (17 %) caused by the installation of a new gas heater and water leakages during construction work;

73. Highlights all the achievements in recent years in areas such as the performance-based budgeting, the ethical framework with all its related rules and procedures, the enhanced communication activities and the increasing amount of measures to improve transparency; welcomes the significant amount of interinstitutional service and cooperation agreements; underlines the importance of the collaboration and sharing of experience among the Union institutions and bodies; suggests that the Committee analyse the possibility of formalised networking activities in different domains in order to share best practises and develop common solutions;

74. Notes the importance of political dialogue between the Committee and Parliament to make sure that valid contributions from the Committee can be incorporated into the work of Parliament; in that context reiterates its request to pursue its best efforts in strengthening the political cooperation between these two institutions.