



TEXTS ADOPTED

P10_TA(2025)0079

Discharge 2023: EU general budget - European Council and Council

1. European Parliament decision of 7 May 2025 on discharge in respect of the implementation of the general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2023, Section II - European Council and Council (2024/2021(DEC))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2023¹,
- having regard to the consolidated annual accounts of the European Union for the financial year 2023 (COM(2024)0272 – C10-0069/2024)²,
- having regard to the Council's 2023 annual reports,
- having regard to the Court of Auditors' annual report on the implementation of the budget concerning the financial year 2023, together with the institutions' replies³,
- having regard to the statement of assurance⁴ as to the reliability of the accounts and the legality and regularity of the underlying transactions provided by the Court of Auditors for the financial year 2023, pursuant to Article 287 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,
- having regard to Article 314(10) and Articles 317, 318 and 319 of

¹ OJ L 58, 23.2.2023, p. 1, ELI:
<http://data.europa.eu/eli/budget/2023/1/oj>.

² OJ C, C/2024/5462, 10.10.2024, ELI:
<http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/5462/oj>.

³ OJ C, C/2024/5882, 9.10.2024, ELI:
<http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/5882/oj>.

⁴ OJ C, C/2024/6041, 10.10.2024, ELI:
<http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/6041/oj>.

the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,

- having regard to Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 July 2018 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union, amending Regulations (EU) No 1296/2013, (EU) No 1301/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1304/2013, (EU) No 1309/2013, (EU) No 1316/2013, (EU) No 223/2014, (EU) No 283/2014, and Decision No 541/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 966/2012⁵, and in particular Articles 59, 118, 260, 261 and 262 thereof,
 - having regard to Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2024/2509 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 September 2024 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union⁶, and in particular Articles 59, 118, 266, 267 and 268 thereof,
 - having regard to Rule 102 of and Annex V to its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the opinion of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A10-0052/2025),
1. Postpones its decision on granting the Secretary-General of the Council discharge in respect of the implementation of the budget of the European Council and of the Council for the financial year 2023;
 2. Sets out its observations in the resolution below;
 3. Instructs its President to forward this decision and the resolution forming an integral part of it to the European Council, the Council, the Commission, the European Ombudsman, the European Data Protection Supervisor and the Court of Auditors, and to arrange for their publication in the *Official Journal of the European Union* (L series).

⁵ OJ L 193, 30.7.2018, p. 1, ELI:
<http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2018/1046/oj>.

⁶ OJ L, 2024/2509, 26.9.2024, ELI:
<http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/2509/oj>.

2. European Parliament resolution of 7 May 2025 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 2023, Section II - European Council and Council (2024/2021(DEC))

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 2023, Section II – European Council and Council,
 - having regard to Rule 102 of and Annex V to its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the opinion of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A10-0052/2025),
- A. whereas in the context of the discharge procedure, the discharge authority wishes to stress the particular importance of further strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the Union institutions by improving transparency and accountability, and implementing the concept of performance-based budgeting and good governance of human resources;
- B. whereas, under Article 319 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the Parliament has the sole responsibility of granting discharge in respect of the implementation of the general budget of the Union, and whereas the budget of the European Council and of the Council is a section of the Union budget;
- C. whereas, pursuant to Article 15(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the European Council is not to exercise legislative functions;
- D. whereas, under Article 317 TFEU, the Commission is to implement the Union budget on its own responsibility, having regard to the principles of sound financial management, and whereas, under the framework in place, the Commission is to confer on the other Union institutions the requisite powers for the implementation of the sections of the budget relating to them;
- E. whereas, under Articles 235(4) and 240(2) TFEU, the European Council and the Council (the ‘Council’) are assisted by the General Secretariat of the Council (the ‘Secretariat’), and whereas the Secretary-General of the Council is wholly responsible for the sound management of the appropriations entered in Section II of the Union budget;

- F. whereas, over the course of more than 20 years, Parliament has been implementing the well-established and respected practice of granting discharge to all Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies, and whereas the Commission supports that the practice of giving discharge to each Union institution, body, office and agency for its administrative expenditure should continue to be pursued;
 - G. whereas, according to Article 59(1) of the Financial Regulation, the Commission shall confer on the other Union Institutions the requisite powers for the implementation of the sections of the budget relating to them;
 - H. whereas, since the 2009 budget discharge, the Council's lack of cooperation in the discharge procedure has compelled Parliament to refuse to grant discharge to the Secretary-General of the Council;
 - I. whereas the European Council and the Council, as Union institutions and as recipients of the general budget of the Union, should be transparent and democratically accountable to the citizens of the Union and subject to democratic scrutiny of the spending of public funds;
 - J. whereas Article 15(3) TFEU requires the EU institutions to ensure in their Rules of Procedure that their proceedings are transparent, while in several of its inquiries and decisions Ombudsman has criticised the Council for its lack of transparency suggesting that the Council has failed fully to grasp the critical link between democracy and the transparency of decision-making;
 - K. whereas the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union confirms the right of taxpayers and of the public to be kept informed about the use of public revenue and that the General Court in its judgment of 25 January 2023 in Case T-163/21 ¹, *De Capitani v Council*, stated on transparency within the Union legislative process that documents produced by the Council in its working groups are not of technical nature but legislative and are therefore subject to access to documents requests;
1. Notes that the budget of the Council falls under MFF Heading 7, 'European public administration', which amounted to EUR 12,3 billion in 2023 (representing 6,4 % of the total Union budget); notes that the Council's budget of approximately EUR 0,6 billion represents approximately 5,2 % of the total administrative expenditure of the Union;
 2. Welcomes that the Court of Auditors (the 'Court'), in its Annual Report for the financial year 2023 examined a sample of 70 transactions under Administration, 10 more than were examined in

¹ Judgment of the General Court of 25 January 2023, *De Capitani v Council*, T-163/21, ECLI:EU:T:2023:15.

2022; further notes that the Court writes that administrative expenditure comprises expenditure on human resources, including expenditure on pensions, which in 2023 accounted for about 70 % of the total administrative expenditure, and expenditure on buildings, equipment, energy, communications and information technology, and that its work over many years indicates that, overall, this spending is low risk;

3. Notes that 21 (30 %) of the 70 transactions contained errors but that the Court, based on the five errors which were quantified, estimates the level of error to be below the materiality threshold;
4. Notes that the Court, in its Annual Report for the financial year 2023, made an observation on the duration of a building maintenance framework contract awarded by the Council; notes that the Court did not identify any quantifiable errors in the four payments examined concerning the Council;

State of play of the discharge procedure

5. Deeply regrets that, since 2009, and again for the financial year 2022, Parliament has had to refuse discharge to the Council because the Council continues to refuse to cooperate with Parliament on the discharge procedure, preventing Parliament from taking an informed decision based on a serious and thorough scrutiny of the implementation of the Council's budget;
6. Notes that, on 20 September 2024, the relevant Parliament services, on behalf of the rapporteur for the discharge procedure, forwarded a questionnaire to the Secretariat of the Council containing 90 important questions for Parliament in order to enable a thorough scrutiny of the implementation of the Council budget and of the management of the Council; further notes that similar questionnaires were sent to all other institutions, all of which have provided Parliament with detailed answers to all the questions;
7. Regrets that, on 23 September 2024, the Secretariat informed Parliament once again that it would not be answering Parliament's questionnaire and that the Council would not be participating in the hearing organised on 12 November 2024 as part of the discharge process and in which all other invited institutions participated;
8. Reiterates Parliament's prerogative to grant discharge pursuant to Article 319 TFEU as well as the applicable provisions of the Financial Regulation and Parliament's Rules of Procedure in line with current interpretation and practice, namely the power to grant discharge in order to maintain transparency and to ensure democratic accountability towards Union taxpayers;
9. Underlines that Article 59(1) of the Financial Regulation states that the Commission shall confer on the other Union Institutions the

requisite powers for the implementation of the sections of the budget relating to them and, therefore, finds it incomprehensible that the Council believes it appropriate that discharge should be granted to the Commission for the implementation of the Council budget;

10. Stresses the well-established and respected practice followed by Parliament over the course of more than 20 years of granting discharge to all Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies, including the European Council and Council; recalls that the Commission has declared its inability to oversee the implementation of the budgets of the other Union institutions; stresses the reiterated view of the Commission that the practice of giving discharge to each Union institution for their administrative expenditure and implementation of the EU budget should continue to be pursued directly by Parliament to preserve the compliance of the principle of sound financial management;
11. Stresses that the current situation implies that Parliament can only check the reports of the Court and of the Ombudsman as well as the publicly available information on the Council's website due to the Council's persistent lack of cooperation with Parliament; underlines that this lack of cooperation undermines Parliament's ability to effectively fulfil its oversight role and to make an informed decision on granting discharge;
12. Deplores that the Council, for more than a decade, has shown that it does not have any political willingness to collaborate with Parliament in the context of the annual discharge procedure; underlines that this attitude has had a lasting negative effect on both institutions, has discredited the management and democratic scrutiny of the Union budget and has damaged the trust of citizens in the Union as a transparent entity; underlines that the Council must adhere to the same standards of accountability it expects from other Union institutions;
13. Reiterates that the Council's continued refusal to engage in the discharge procedure is an unacceptable breach of democratic accountability. Calls for legal and procedural amendments to withhold budgetary appropriations to any Union institution that fails to comply with transparency obligations;
14. Recalls that the case-law of the Court of Justice of the European Union supports the right of taxpayers and the public to be kept informed about the use of public revenue; demands, therefore, full respect for Parliament's prerogative and role as guarantor of the democratic accountability principle; calls on the Council to duly follow up on the recommendations adopted by Parliament in the context of the discharge procedure and insists on the full application of Article 14(1) TEU;

15. Calls on the Council to resume negotiations with Parliament without undue delay and to actively engage with Parliament at the highest level as soon as possible involving the Secretaries-General and the Presidents of both institutions, in order to break the deadlock and resolve the long-standing discharge impasse, while respecting the respective roles of Parliament and the Council in the discharge procedure and ensuring transparency, credibility and proper democratic control of budget implementation; requests that Commission and the Council legal services provide an opinion on potential Treaty-based solutions to enforce Council's accountability in the discharge procedure;
16. Stresses that, while the current situation needs to be improved through better inter-institutional cooperation within the framework of the Treaties, a revision of the Treaties could make the discharge procedure clearer and more transparent by giving Parliament the explicit competence to grant discharge to all Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies individually; stresses, however, that pending such a review, the current situation must be improved through enhanced inter-institutional cooperation; urges in this sense the Council to actively engage with the Parliament;
17. Notes that despite the Council being unwilling to cooperate in the discharge procedure, Parliament, nevertheless, stresses some political priorities and sets out some observations concerning the budgetary and financial management of the Council and other observations relevant for the discharge procedure in this report;
18. Notes that, given the Council's lack of cooperation with Parliament, observations in the following sections primarily rely on aggregated information publicly available, which provides limited detail;

Political priorities

19. Regrets that the Council exerts its prerogative in the nomination and appointment procedures for many Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies without taking into account the views of the interested parties or the recommendations of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF);
20. Notes the Council's tradition of not questioning the appointments of individual Member States for most positions;
21. Recalls that, pursuant to Article 286(2) TFEU, the Council appoints the members of the Court of Auditors, in accordance with proposals made by each Member State, after consultation with Parliament; recalls that, on the basis of this prerequisite, Parliament delivers an opinion on the candidates; regrets that the Council has repeatedly disregarded Parliament's recommendations in its consultative role regarding the appointment of the members of the Court; recalls that although Parliament's opinion is non-binding on the Council,

candidates who received an unfavourable opinion withdrew their candidatures by accepting Parliament's decision, thereby recognising the role of Parliament as the democratic supervisory authority linked to the safeguarding of the Union budget; calls on the Council to recognise Parliament's role by cooperating in the discharge procedure;

22. Recalls that the judges and advocates-general of the Court of Justice of the European Union are appointed by common accord of the governments of the Member States after consultation of a panel responsible for giving an opinion on prospective candidates' suitability to perform the duties concerned;
23. Calls on the rotating Council Presidencies to stop using corporate sponsorship to contribute to covering their expenses as this runs the risk of creating conflicts of interest, in line with the conclusions of the workshop held by Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control on 27 June 2023; notes that, in her decision of 9 September 2024 on the strategic initiative on sponsorship of the presidency of the Council of the European Union, the European Ombudsman encouraged the Council to take stock of how the non-binding rules adopted by the Council for the use of sponsorship by its presidency (the Guidance) have been implemented and to explore other possible measures that could help mitigate the risks associated with the use of sponsorship; reiterates its call on the Council to provide a budget for the Council Presidencies to ensure adequate and uniform standards of efficiency and effectiveness in the work in the Council in general;
24. Expresses deep concern over the Hungarian government's misuse of its role in the EU Presidency to pursue bilateral engagements that contradict the Union's core values, such as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin, despite Union sanctions and the International Criminal Court arrest warrant against the latter for war crimes; notes with alarm similar engagements with other authoritarian leaders, undermining the EU's credibility; calls on the Council to firmly condemn such actions and to take all necessary measures to ensure that Member States holding the Presidency act in alignment with EU principles, safeguarding the Union's integrity and values;

Budgetary and financial management

25. Regrets that the budget of the European Council and the Council has not been divided into two clearly separated budgets as recommended by Parliament in previous discharge resolutions in order to improve transparency and accountability, not least concerning the European Council, given that it is currently impossible to get reliable information regarding its costs; stresses the importance of reliable data for objective control; calls on the compliance with the

recommendation of the discharge authority;

26. Notes that the Council's budget was EUR 647 908 757 for 2023, representing an increase of 6 % compared to 2022, which is higher than the increase of 2,3 % between 2021 and 2022; notes that this increase is mainly related to the revision of salary update parameters due to inflation;
27. Notes that the overall implementation rate of the Council's budget in 2023 was 97,0 %; notes that almost EUR 20 million in appropriations were cancelled at the end of 2023, half of which originated from the staff expenditure budget line;
28. Notes that, in accordance with Article 29 of the Financial Regulation, the Council carried out 41 budgetary transfers in 2023 for a cumulated amount of EUR 6,5 million; notes further that three of those transfers required that the budgetary authority be informed in accordance with Article 29(2), for the purpose of reinforcing various budget lines including 'Fitting-out and installation work', 'Water, gas, electricity and heating', 'Acquisition of equipment and software' and 'Cost of renting, maintenance and repair of service cars';
29. Calls on the Council to publish an annual breakdown of travel and representation expenses of senior officials, including the President of the European Council, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the Secretariat, in a user-friendly format accessible to the public;
30. Notes that appropriations carried over from 2023 to 2024 totalled EUR 85,5 million covering mainly computer systems, cost of interpretation provided in 2023, for which invoices have not been yet agreed with the European Commission services at the time of the closure, buildings, information and communication, audiovisual and conference equipment, other staff expenditure: and transport;
31. Expresses concern over insufficient control mechanisms regarding the Council's use of consultancy services and external contractors; calls for full disclosure of all contracts exceeding EUR 50 000, detailing the scope, deliverables, and awarded entities, to prevent potential misuse of public funds;
32. Notes that the average time for payments of invoices decreased from 18 to 13 days from 2022 to 2023, well below the maximum time-limit of 30 days, thus avoiding interest on late payments;
33. Notes that mission expenses, comprising both mission expenses from the Secretariat and mission expenses of staff related to the European Council, increased by 25 % between 2022 and 2023, and that travel expenses of delegations incurred by Presidencies and national delegations increased by 36,6 % during the same period; calls on the Council to assess this significant increase in mission expenditure; in

the absence of access to detailed information, encourages the Council to use these resources in the spirit of sound financial management;

Internal management, performance and internal control

34. Notes that the Council laid down objectives for the performance of its budget in 2023, namely to ensure ongoing decision-making in the European Council and the Council; to ensure continuous support for the European Council and the Council through the effective and efficient use of financial resources, particularly in view of the persistent pressure of inflation and the resulting price increases due to contract indexation and to further proceed with the process of administrative digital modernisation with the objective of enhancing the quality of the Secretariat's organisation and the appropriate use of resources;
35. Notes that, in order to ensure the efficient use of its budget in 2023, the Secretariat continued to improve its financial management processes, notably based on the recommendations of a number of internal task forces; welcomes, in particular, the new performance tools, such as the inclusion of human resources and skills elements in the integrated management planning exercise, the full digitalisation of the financial workflows and the introduction of the electronic signature;
36. Welcomes the greater use of data in decision-making, notably based on the monthly financial dashboard, showing key performance indicators across the Secretariat services and the Managers' dashboard with key insights from HR data in order to facilitate daily management and decisions in the area of human resources;
37. Notes that the Secretariat organised 4 429 meetings in 2023, which was relatively stable compared to 2022; notes further that the number of physical meetings increased by 11 % compared to 2022, while the number of meetings held by videoconference or in hybrid mode decreased substantially, by more than 60 %;
38. Notes the Secretariat launched 17 open procurement procedures, 12 new negotiated procedures, as well as 21 inter-institutional procedures (any value) with the Council not in the lead; notes that, by the end of 2023, 41 contracts were signed, compared to 42 in 2022, and 47 Lots (any category) were being worked on; notes that contracts were awarded for a total amount of EUR 124,1 million in 2023, which corresponds to 19,15 % of the Council's annual budget; notes, that out of the total contracted amount, 0,5 % was committed in low and middle value contracts, 58 % in specific contracts under framework contracts where Council is the sole contracting authority and 69,5 % in specific contracts awarded under inter-institutional framework contracts;

39. Notes that the Council transmitted its annual report on internal audits carried out in 2023 to the discharge authority, in accordance with Article 118 of the Financial Regulation; notes that, at the end of 2023, 81 % of the recommendations issued during the years 2020-2022 had been implemented, 18 % were still open and for 1 %, risk had been accepted by management or the recommendations were no longer applicable; notes that four internal audits planned in the 2023 work programme were concluded during the year and two were still ongoing at the end of 2023; notes that the internal auditor issued high priority recommendations in three audits of the 2023 work programme related to transport services, IOLAN servers and core services and IOLAN endpoint systems;

Human resources, equality and staff well-being

40. Notes that, out of 3 116 members of staff at the end of 2023, 79 % were permanent staff, 12,8 % were temporary staff, 7,2 % were contractual agents and 1 % were seconded national experts; notes that the repartition of permanent and temporary staff between job categories remained stable with 1 474,25 administrators (AD), 1 159 assistants (AST) and 230 secretaries (AST-SC) in 2023, compared to 1 519, 1 284 and 190 in 2022; notes that the occupation rate of the establishment plan was 97,4 % at the end of 2023;
41. Notes that, given the Council's lack of cooperation with Parliament, observations in this section primarily rely on aggregated information published on the Council's website which provides limited detail;
42. Notes the other initiatives taken by the Secretariat to become a more diverse and inclusive workplace; welcomes that the Council received the 2023 Ombudsman's award for Good Administration in the category 'Excellence in diversity and inclusion' for its Positive Action Programme for Trainees with Disabilities which meant that 6 trainees with disabilities were hosted in the Secretariat in 2023;
43. Regrets the lack of publicly available information concerning the gender and geographical distribution of staff in the Secretariat; calls on the Council to provide information to Parliament on gender balance, geographical distribution and disabilities of its members of staff and on the related internal policies; encourages the Council to promote geographical balance of its staff by offering a wider pool of candidates from underrepresented Member States;
44. Welcomes the Secretariat's efforts in 2023 to attract and retain a qualified and younger workforce through various initiatives such as the recruitment of eight junior policy administrators under the new Junior Policy Team programme, the revision of the internal mobility rules and the participation of 41 of the Secretariat's members of staff in an Interinstitutional Job Shadowing Exercise; emphasizes that traineeships should be remunerated in compliance with the

European Parliament's resolution of 14 June 2023 on Quality Traineeships in the Union (2020/2005(INL)), which calls for all internships in Europe to be paid; regrets the lack of information on the implementation of the Council's Employer Branding Action Plan prepared in 2023;

45. Notes that, in 2023, the 2020-2023 Psychosocial Risk Prevention plan was the subject of a review, the results of which have been taken into account in preparing a new Risk Prevention plan and updating the Psychosocial Intervention Plan as part of the Council's initiatives to promote staff wellbeing, both individually and as teams or units; notes that several forms of support and courses were offered to members of staff and managers of the Secretariat, such as a dedicated management training session on psychological safety, Guidance for Managers on mental health, specific workshops on psychosocial risk prevention organised on demand and stress management workshops for the Spanish and Belgian Council Presidencies;
46. Notes that the Secretariat completed the New Ways of Working (NWOW) pilot project, which was launched in 2018, and conducted an evaluation providing valuable insights especially in terms of change communication, user involvement and staff engagement in change processes; notes that the Council shared the results of the pilot project with other organisations conducting similar programmes; calls on the Council to also share the lessons learned with the discharge authority;

Ethical framework and transparency

47. Regrets that two key components of the ethical framework of the Council, the 'Guide to Ethics and Conduct' for Secretariat staff and the 'Code of Conduct for the President of the European Council', are available on the Council's website without further guidance or date of publication; criticises that, despite several requests by Parliament, the code of conduct for the President of the European Council has not been brought in line with those of Parliament and the Commission, in particular in terms of post term-of-office activities; calls on forthwith rectification of foregoing deficiencies;
48. Reiterates that ethical conduct contributes to sound financial management and increases public trust and that, as stressed by the Court in its Special Report 13/2019, there is scope for improvement in the ethical frameworks of the Union institutions; recalls in particular the recommendation issued by the Court with regard to improving the Council's ethical framework; expresses concern about the lack of a common Union ethical framework governing the work of the representatives of Member States in the Council as identified by the Court;

49. Notes that, as part of the implementation of the Secretary-General's Decision 23/2021 concerning psychological and sexual harassment at work, several actions were taken in 2023 such as the publication on the Secretariat's intranet of the Guide to preventing harassment in the workplace, awareness-raising activities for newcomers regarding the zero tolerance approach of the Council and the organisation of compulsory trainings on anti-harassment and inappropriate behaviour for new managers and staff with management responsibilities;
50. Notes that the Secretariat publishes an annual report with information regarding the occupational activities of former senior officials of the Secretariat after leaving the service in accordance with Article 16, third and fourth paragraphs, of the Staff Regulations of officials of the European Union; notes that, according to the report concerning 2023, one former senior official declared their intention to engage in occupational activities less than 12 months after they left and was granted permission from the Appointing Authority to engage in one activity subject to a certain condition which was aimed at respecting the mitigation period of the second paragraph of Article 16 of the Staff Regulations;
51. Urges the Council to establish stricter post-term employment rules for senior officials, including an extended cooling-off period and mandatory public disclosure of private-sector affiliations; calls on the Council to make the participation of Member States' Permanent Representations in the EU Transparency Register mandatory;
52. Regrets the fact that the participation of the Member States' Permanent Representatives in the mandatory transparency register, set up by the interinstitutional agreement of 20 May 2021 between Parliament, the Council and the Commission, is completely voluntary as the application of the conditionality principle is left to the discretion of each Member State's Permanent Representation; notes that only eight Member States and the Union institutions abide by the best practice of applying a mandatory broad-scope definition of lobbyist in their regulatory framework and insists that all Permanent Representations should take an active part in the mandatory transparency register before, during and after their Member State's presidency of the Council; calls for stronger and harmonized ethics rules on conflicts of interest, revolving doors, and lobbying transparency; recalls Parliament's position that Member State representatives who benefit directly from Union subsidies through the businesses they own should not be allowed to participate in policy or budgetary discussions and votes related to those subsidies; regrets that the Council does not fully use the mandatory transparency register or accept proposals to improve it; reiterates its call on the Council to refrain from engaging with unregistered lobbyists;

53. Regrets that the Council does not fully utilise the mandatory transparency register beyond its current limitations, rejecting any recommendation for improvements; reiterates its call on the Council to refuse to meet with unregistered lobbyists;
54. Urges the Council to mandate that all high-ranking officials, including Permanent Representatives and Heads of Delegation, publicly disclose their meetings with interest groups and lobbyists in a standardised transparency register, similar to the obligations imposed on Members of the European Parliament and the European Commission;
55. Strongly regrets that the Council continues to systematically withhold or delay access to legislative documents and the decision-making process in the Council is still far from fully transparent, thereby hindering public scrutiny of its decision-making, negatively affecting citizens' trust in the Union as a transparent entity and jeopardising the reputation of the Union as a whole; recalls and supports the recommendations of the European Ombudsman regarding the transparency of the Council legislative process in strategic inquiry OI/2/2017/TE; urges the Council to take all the measures necessary to implement the recommendations of the Ombudsman and the relevant rulings of the Court of Justice of the European Union without undue delay; recalls that the Court of Justice of the European Union, in its judgement in Case T-163/21, *De Capitani v Council*, underlined that clearer legislative transparency is needed from the Council in order to ensure access to legislative documents, corresponding to the Council's obligation in terms of public scrutiny and accountability of the co-legislators as the basis of any democratic legitimacy;
56. Is concerned that, in 2023, the European Ombudsman once again called on the Council to make legislative documents available at a time that would allow the public to participate effectively in the discussions; notes that the European Ombudsman also called on the Council to continue its efforts with regard to informing the public adequately about the restrictive measures adopted against Russia, to the greatest extent possible; welcomes the strategic enquiry launched by the European Ombudsman in 2023 on how the institutions handle requests for public access to legislative documents, based in particular on six recent complaints to the Ombudsman concerning public access to Union legislative documents handled by the Council;
57. Notes that the Access to Documents team reported that they received and replied to an unusually high number of requests for public access to documents in 2023, 3 732 initial requests for access to documents and 40 confirmatory applications, which required the analysis of 13 912 documents; notes that, among the initial requests for access, full access was granted to 10 908 documents (78,4 %)

and partial access to 1 600 documents (11,5 %) while access was refused to 1 404 documents (10,1 %); notes that for the confirmatory applications, full access was granted to 53 documents and partial access to 45 documents, while access was refused to 48 documents; notes that initial requests were processed, on average, in 16 working days and confirmatory applications in 32 working days;

58. Welcomes that, according to the publicly available annual reports, no cases of fraud or irregularity were brought to the attention of the responsible authorising officers by delegation during 2023, nor were such cases subject to the competence of the panel (Article 143 of the Financial Regulation) or OLAF;

Digitalisation

59. Notes that, in 2023, the Secretariat continued to pursue its goal of digital transformation, in line with its Digital Strategy priorities for 2022-2025; notes, that out of 113 digitalisation projects in the annual work plan, concerning, in particular, the areas of shared services, policy, legal and IT, 37 % were completed at the end of the year while 8 % were cancelled or merged and 38 % were still ongoing; notes that more diversified training courses were organised, including specific courses for the electronic signature of contracts and to promote FIORI, the new user experience of SAP;
60. Urges the Council to accelerate the implementation of secure digital voting and document-sharing systems to enhance efficiency, accountability, and reduce unnecessary paper-based processes;
61. Welcomes that, in 2023, 97 % of invoices were submitted electronically, the same as in 2022; acknowledges that, with between 30 and 40 % of purchase orders and contracts being signed electronically each month in 2023, significant progress was made towards the full digitalisation of the financial workflow, from launching procurement procedures to paying invoices electronically;
62. Notes that, in 2023, the Council took steps in favour of greater digital accessibility, in particular through the publication of a Digital Accessibility Guide;

Cybersecurity and data protection

63. Notes that, in 2023, the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) issued a Supervisory Opinion in accordance with Article 57(1)(g) of Regulation (EU) 2018/1725 of the European Parliament

and of the Council ² relating to the need to conduct a data protection impact assessment concerning the project of the Secretariat regarding the use of centralised human resource analytics and reporting services and the establishment a data warehouse; notes that the EDPS did not report any investigation or complaint concerning the Council in 2023;

64. Expresses concern over the lack of robust safeguards against surveillance and data collection by third parties; calls for enhanced security measures, including mandatory data encryption and regular security audits of all digital communication systems used by the Council;
65. Notes that, in order to improve the cybersecurity awareness and preparedness of its staff, the Secretariat designed and launched several new training courses related to information security, counterespionage, and cybersecurity in 2023; notes further that awareness-raising events about cybersecurity and information security were organised during Cybersecurity Month in October 2023;

Buildings

66. Notes that budget line 2 0 1 1 for 'Water, gas, electricity and heating' was reinforced by 33 % through a budgetary transfer in 2023; notes that the Secretariat continued to reduce its energy consumption, through methods such as reducing the building heating and replacing the boilers in the Justus Lipsius building;
67. Notes that key building projects were executed in 2023, such as the renovation of some meeting rooms in the LEX and Justus Lipsius buildings, the continuous renovation of office corridors in the Justus Lipsius building, improvements of facilities and infrastructure for bikes in the Council's premises and the modernisation of the Justus Lipsius reception desks;
68. Regrets that the Council has still not implemented a simplified accreditation procedure to facilitate the access of the other Union institutions' staff to Council's premises; calls on the Council to implement this measure;

Environment and sustainability

² Regulation (EU) 2018/1725 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2018 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data by the Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Regulation (EC) No 45/2001 and Decision No 1247/2002/EC (OJ L 295, 21.11.2018, p. 39, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2018/1725/oj>).

69. Notes that, further to an external audit performed in 2023, the EcoManagement and Audit Scheme was maintained and that Energy Performance of Buildings certificates were renewed;
70. Notes that, as part of the continuing priority efforts for sustainable mobility, facilities and infrastructures for bikes in the Secretariat premises were improved and tailored and videoconferencing facilities in the form of 'meet anywhere rooms' were renovated or put in place; notes further that efforts to on-board staff and managers in the green transformation were deployed through training and awareness-raising actions;

Interinstitutional cooperation

71. Stresses the need for Article 319 TFEU to be revised in order to explicitly stipulate that Parliament, besides granting discharge to the Commission, also grants discharge to other Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies in respect of the implementation of their sections of the budget or of their budgets; invites the Council to overcome the inter-institutional conflict and to resume talks with the European Parliament in order to reach a common agreement for a smooth resumption of the discharge procedure;

Communication

72. Notes that, in 2023, the overall budget for communication implemented in the course of the year, taking transfers into account, was EUR 11 871 300, i.e. 3,54 % higher than the 2022 budget;
73. Notes that the Secretariat provides communication services to the President of the European Council, whose web presence was fundamentally revamped in 2022, the President of the Eurogroup, the rotating presidency, the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Member States and the Secretariat; notes that 2023 saw a marked increase in collaboration between the Secretariat's digital team and the presidencies, in particular, close editorial coordination led to increased synergies in terms of content reuse and better complementarity, which maximised the overall communication impact;
74. Notes that, according to an online survey conducted in the last quarter of 2023, 67 % of users were satisfied with their overall experience with the Council's website, which had over 23 million visits in 2023, a 1 % increase compared to 2022, and 57 900 subscribers, compared to 51 600 in 2022.