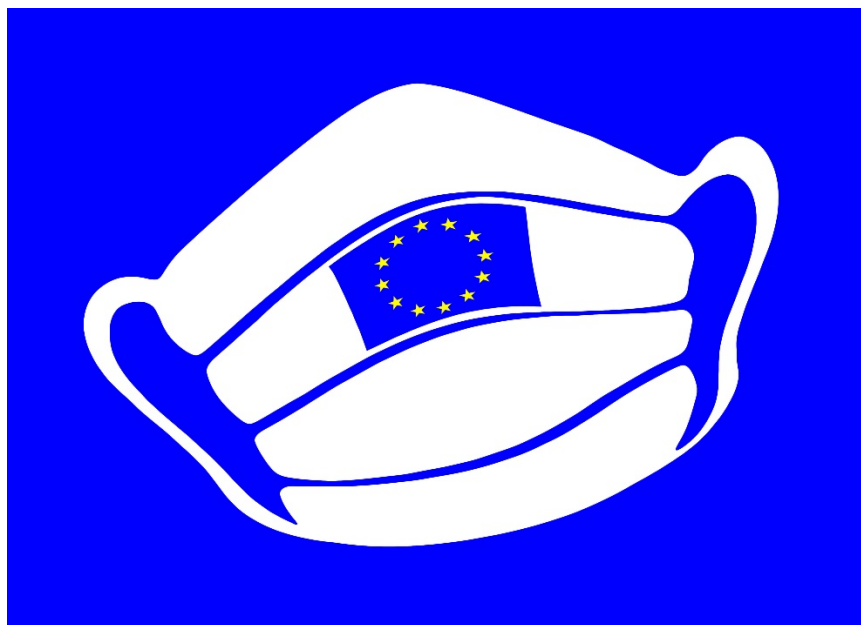


COVID-19 response of EU public administration



COVID-19 response of EU public administration

Abstract

In order to provide the Members of the Budgetary Control Committee with reliable information and data on the COVID-19 response of the EU public administration, the study analyses the EU institutions' response, their business continuity measures and their impact on the budget from 2020 onwards and staff of the respective institution. Furthermore, the study provides an overview of practices and challenges around the new working modalities EU institutions are adopting for the post-pandemic future, as well as recommendations for the way forward.

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APA	Accredited Parliament Assistant
BCP	Business Continuity Plan
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union
CMC	Crisis Management Committee
CoR	European Committee of the Regions
CPQS	Preparatory Committee for Questions Related to the Staff Regulations
EC	European Commission
ECA	European Court of Auditors
EEAS	European External Action Service
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
ICDT	Inter-institutional Committee for Digital Transformation
PPE	Personal Protection Equipment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The extensive analysis and consultations conducted for this study have helped define impacts of COVID-19 on EU public administration, the measures taken and their consequences, as outlined below. The analysis covers seven European institutions: the European Parliament (EP), the European Commission (EC), the European Court of Justice (CJEU), the European Court of Auditors (ECA), the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). Moreover, the analysis does not cover decentralised agencies and EU delegations but only the headquarters of the EEAS.

The pandemic deeply impacted the functioning of EU institutions in terms of daily administrative routine and institutional decision-making. The pandemic also led to changes in voting and other procedures as well as new formal and informal inter-institutional dialogue.

The study shows that EU institutions reacted quickly. By adopting multiple solutions, they promptly switched to teleworking and exploited technological possibilities to overcome the initial difficulties. All EU institutions improved support for the physical and mental health of staff, empowering existing medical and social internal services and investing in the safety of their infrastructure. All this ensured they could face the emergency in the short term.

In the medium to long-term with changes spurred by the COVID-19 crisis stabilising, new challenges will arise or are already here. These concern hybrid working, IT threats, new approaches to workspace, etc. Most importantly, the paradigm shift in working modalities due to the pandemic must be accompanied by significant changes in mindset, skills and attitudes to fully embrace the 'new normal'.

Below, more details are offered on each of the research topics.

Challenges



During the crisis

Challenges were either common, i.e., found across the EU institutions, or specific to individual institutions due to their role.

The common challenges include:

- difficulties in holding internal meetings,
- managing office routines,
- internal and external coordination,
- managing internal working space,
- organising and going on missions.

The challenges specific to individual institutions are linked to audit visits (ECA), meetings among members and with other institutions (EP, CoR, EESC), the decision-making process (EP, EC), repatriation of EU staff and their families (EEAS) and problems holding hearings (CJEU).

Business continuity



Business continuity plan effectiveness

Most institutions found their business continuity plans (BCPs) were effective and key to ensuring business continuity.

Both CoR and EESC, as well as the ECA, agree that BCPs need to be re-designed to be more agile and provide quicker responses as well as immediate actions with clearer decision-making procedures and 'lines of command' in case of emergency, as well as more efficient internal communication. Furthermore, the updated plans need to include a wider range of crisis scenarios.

Recommendations

Short term (2022-2023): An internal reflection in each EU institution should draw lessons and build institutional memory of how BCPs should function.

Medium/long-term (after 2024): BCPs should be regularly updated and upgraded with broad involvement of both hierarchy and administrative personnel to 1) better define responsibilities and chains of command in a crisis, 2) improve internal communication, 3) check redundancy and resilience of administrative routines and IT framework, and 4) empower internal medical and psychological services.

Teleworking and new working methods

EU staff started compulsory teleworking on 16 March 2020, with the exception of services which had to be on office premises, e.g. security and logistics.

There was already some flexibility in most institutions, but the existing schemes had to be extended, including conditions for maternal and parental leave. The schemes facilitated the sudden shift to full teleworking, efficiently and promptly.

The gradual return to office in spring 2020 included different options for the number of days and hours to be spent on institutional premises.

Working modalities and procedures also changed significantly with remote working and the inability to access premises. For instance, distance checks have replaced on-the-spot checks for ECA auditors and online voting procedures were introduced in the EP, CoR and EESC.

In general, the shift to teleworking has been quicker and smoother for institutions with existing flexible locations and hours.

Hybrid working will continue to be a reality for EU staff, also to stay competitive in the job market. The fast shift to hybrid working implies not only preparedness in terms of equipment but also an important shift in mindset and the ability to fully adapt to the new working modalities. New skills for managing people working fully or partially outside the office have already been integrated, the past two years having been 'training'.

There are new structures to prepare for and design the 'new world of working' in EU institutions, although little detailed information on these is so far available.

The costs of teleworking are perceived differently by the institutions. For many, the additional costs and investments, especially for new IT equipment and software licenses, largely took place in 2020.

Recommendations

Short term (2022-2023): In the first phase, special attention should be given to a necessary change in mindset, skills and attitudes, especially at managerial level, to manage staff in a hybrid environment. Despite differences, sharing experiences among EU institutions can be very productive. A common blueprint for heads of unit/managers could help capitalise on experiences as well as disseminate good practices across EU institutions.

Medium/long-term (after 2024): innovative tools should be developed to overcome those issues, with some degree of experimentation encouraged. Regular exchanges among HR departments in different institutions should also involve sharing 'best practices' and jointly testing new working solutions. An open inter-institutional structure can be set up to promote experimentation and collection of best practices. In identifying and testing new working solutions, staff representatives, and staff in general, shall be involved both to have a quick 'reality check' on the level of acceptance and to acquire new ideas.

Building management

Measures were introduced in all the institutions to mitigate the risk of infection. These include separate entrances and exits, plexiglass screens and thermal sensors.

The pandemic boosted a general re-thinking of the workspace in the EU institutions based on the so called 3Bs: 'behaviour, bricks and bytes'.

There is general consensus that workspaces are or will be redesigned to adapt to the new working modalities. In particular, permanent workstations will often be replaced by flexible ones. How these should be organised is still under debate, but a frequent objective is to have open collaborative spaces (e.g. in the EC). At the same time, there is some reluctance by staff to leave fixed offices for 'hot desking'.

Recommendations

Short term (2022-2023): Shifting from traditional individual offices to open space entails not only changing the physical space but also the working modalities. If not harmonised, both together might have unintended effects. A careful assessment of the new layout should be made to understand such impacts, and any remedies promptly adopted. At least in this first phase, a constant monitoring of the new adopted solutions should allow an ongoing adjustment and optimisation.

Medium/long-term (after 2024): There is general satisfaction with inter-institutional cooperation and coordination during the pandemic. This calls for

a reflection on a possible enhanced cooperation beyond the crisis. Building and workspace policy can offer opportunities to see more synergies and coordination among institutions regarding office space management, bearing in mind the complexity and specific features and needs of each institution.

Staff recruitment

In response to the challenges of remote working and travel restrictions, EU institutions had to adapt their procedures to ensure continued recruitment. The whole process (from interviews to entry into service) shifted to digital with online selection procedures and paperless workflows.

The recruitment process did not change substantially after the peak of the pandemic. In the future, final recruitment interviews and decisions will again take place at institutional premises rather than online. There is, however, a sharp shift to digital and paperless for the application phase and internal HR management of the selection process.

Recommendations

The pandemic revealed the need to have new high-skilled staff in the EU institutions with competences and capacities which are already highly required in the market (e.g. cybersecurity). However, EU institutions could find it difficult to attract and keep such talent. Hybrid working modalities can partially make working for EU institutions more attractive. However, a more complex reflection is needed to see if the current competitions and long-term job contracts are the most effective way to attract the necessary competence and expertise.

IT tools and infrastructure

The pandemic has been a catalyst for digital transformation, pushing all the institutions to take measures to ensure the organisations function at both political and administrative levels. Consistent with these challenges, there were three main types of response:

- Provision of ICT equipment for all staff;
- Shift of internal procedures to digital (procurement, recruitment, etc.); and
- Transformation of some institutional activities to remote (training, auditing, judicial activities).

The shift to digital had already been planned pre-pandemic but was not expected to occur so quickly. It is now important to identify the gaps and strategically plan what still needs to be digitalised.

IT has proved to be a highly integrated sector among institutions. There were greater efficiencies thanks to coordination at strategic level.

Cybersecurity will be a key challenge in the future, as cybersecurity threats are directly linked to advances in technology, especially for hybrid working. User awareness programmes are being implemented and updated.

In terms of budget, additional investments are still needed though to a lesser extent, as most investments were already made in 2020.

Inter-institutional cooperation



Recommendation

The strategic priority of IT investments remains important to keep EU institutions both safe and resilient to crises. Beyond the crisis, the digitalisation process makes cybersecurity crucial. Investment in IT should be sufficient to guarantee full preparedness in times of crisis and beyond, taking also in consideration the need to hire high-skilled personnel (see above recommendation on staff recruitment).

Cooperation and synergies

Inter-institutional cooperation took various forms from March 2020 to achieve different objectives. The documentation highlights:

- Regular meetings to exchange information on the evolving health crisis and to coordinate measures (e.g. to ensure business continuity);
- Service meetings for coordination on specific matters; and
- Joint operational measures e.g. new IT systems and procedures.

Inter-institutional cooperation and coordination during the crisis was largely considered effective. The inter-institutional Medical Board has been praised as key to ensuring coordination between institutions on medical aspects of the crisis. Coordination between the CoR and EESC was particularly integrated due to their sharing services and premises. Cooperation between IT services was also considered successful as it had solid roots already before the crisis.

Recommendation

The general satisfaction with inter-institutional cooperation and coordination during the pandemic calls for a reflection on possible enhanced cooperation beyond the crisis in different fields such as building policy, HR management, joint public procurement. Indeed, joint efforts to overcome the pandemic crisis enhanced the cooperative attitude among EU institutions. In this perspective, tapping on the empowered cooperation can be a valuable opportunity.

Public procurement



Goods and services purchased

EU institutions opened many negotiating procedures to purchase goods and services during the pandemic. Most of these were organised in compliance with standard EU rules but some required maximum flexibility without prior notification of the contract notice on the basis of urgency, as foreseen by the Financial Regulation.

This flexibility was required in particular for medical equipment, IT services/devices and studies.

Simplification and innovation

Procurement procedures had to be organised urgently, requiring institutions to increase their capacity to launch calls for tender, deliver documents and provide public procurement advice. This was possible

thanks to simplified procedures in place prior to the pandemic, which were accelerated or extended to other areas.

The challenge now is to reinforce and expand the use of eTendering, eSubmission and digital signatures to other areas of administration and procurement, post-crisis.

Recommendation

In light of the successful implementation of joint procurement procedures during the crisis, the continuation of cooperation in this area should be envisaged, as well as the use of more flexible and simplified procedures where possible and in line with the Financial Regulation.

Staff productivity and satisfaction



Productivity and performance

Institutions report a positive experience of teleworking for most staff with no significant influence on productivity. Challenges to performance and productivity include decreased cooperation and teamwork, IT problems and an increased workload.

For managers, the fast transition to teleworking often required extra effort to manage teams, particularly when confronted by the need to evaluate staff performance differently than in the past. Performance evaluation is evolving, as are managerial skills and mindsets in general.

Training remains important for staff to acquire new skills. The online format proved successful during the height of the pandemic and reached a wider audience but should not entirely replace in-person training, which is more effective for certain subjects.

There are new ways of learning to be integrated, with knowledge being transferred in a more fluid manner rather than in restricted timeframes and formats.

Workload and work-life balance

Staff surveys in many EU institutions highlight a positive perception of teleworking for workload and work-life balance.

Increased workload and negative effects on work-life balance were especially relevant during full lockdowns in 2020. Some staff reported an inability to separate professional and private lives when working from home, and some noted the negative impact of less social and professional contacts with colleagues. HR and managers gave increased attention to work-life balance, including the right to disconnect.

Generally staff are very positive about the impact of teleworking on work-life balance with the current hybrid working modalities.

Team empowerment

The adoption of teleworking by staff in EU institutions had an impact on team empowerment. Several institutions mentioned an inability to organise team building activities and away days as having a potential negative

influence on staff cohesion in the longer term. Managers reported difficulties in keeping staff motivated during teleworking.

The new hybrid modalities do not *per se* reduce the sense of belonging or the ability to work in teams and co-create, but they could amplify these risks.

Recommendations

A shift in performance evaluation in a hybrid working environment is needed. Emphasis should increasingly be put on trust-based and result-oriented assessments rather than on 'time inputs'.

Particular attention should also be given to training which takes into account new ways of learning.

*Increased attention should continue to be given to work-life balance and the right to disconnect. New ideas and *modus operandi* should be developed to ensure team cohesion and empowerment in a hybrid work setting. More specifically, managers shall be trained for a new form of leadership capable of motivating staff in a hybrid context.*

Staff health



Measures to support staff health

Support for mental health along with medical support became a priority in most institutions. This was delivered through tailor-made services, including helplines, support groups, as well as webinars on wellbeing and mindfulness. Information was also provided to staff on coping with teleworking and work-life balance to avoid burnouts.

Several institutions hired additional staff to deal with the health crisis, including doctors, nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists. Some institutions (EC, EEAS, ECA) used 'pulse' surveys to regularly check staff wellbeing during the crisis.

For some institutions existing mental health and wellbeing programmes helped significantly (e.g. EP).

Health protocols

The key measures introduced by the new COVID-19 protocols are:

- Temperature screening at entrances;
- Compulsory mask wearing;
- Social distancing (minimum 1.5 metres);
- Compliance with hand hygiene (hand sanitisers in buildings);
- Enhanced cleaning (e.g. disinfection of common areas);
- Protection screens;
- Modification of ventilation and air-conditioning systems where needed; and
- Awareness raising (e.g. signs, e-mails).

The establishment of a fully digital tracing system for EC staff, which is still in use, should be mentioned. This has proven a great example of how IT can support the needs of individuals.

Recommendations

Continued medical and psychological support to staff should be ensured beyond the crisis. Also, the new hybrid working modalities entail the need to empower health and social services.

Impact on budget Budget variation

COVID-19 impacted the absorption capacity of the analysed EU institutions. In the majority of cases, the 2020 ratio of appropriations (total planned budget) on financial commitments was lower than in 2019 (96% 2020 vs. 99% in 2019). The EU institutions with lower budgets absorption (EP, CoR, EESC) are more exposed to COVID-19 impacts as their budget usually goes to organising large meetings.

Costs avoided and savings

As with the budget variation, the three organisations with more savings are the EP, the CoR and the EESC. The costs avoided due to the pandemic relate to travel, meeting organisation and building maintenance (especially less heating).

Additional costs

The pandemic meant EU institutions had more costs, mainly related to IT investments to support teleworking and teleconferencing. However, COVID-19 also accelerated digitalisation, so the investments also dematerialise administrative workflows and expand the use of web technology to enhance communication and transparency with EU citizens.

Long-term budgetary impact

The pandemic will mainly affect the distribution rather than the amount of budget allocated. Expenditure will be steered by the new working modalities and priorities, e.g., from traditional to online meetings, from physical to digital facilities, etc.

Recommendations

An overall cost-benefit analysis of the different options (in terms of e.g. building space, working modalities, IT solutions) might be implemented to provide a more precise overview of the long-term budgetary impact.

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Background and aim

The study analyses how EU institutions reacted to the COVID-19 crisis and the operational measures introduced to ensure business continuity. The analysis will inform Members of the EP Budgetary Control Committee on the impacts of these measures on staff in EU institutions and on the 2020 budget. The evidence will support long-term planning for future working methods and budget planning.

The analysis covers:

- Changes in working methods (their effectiveness in ensuring business continuity and staff recruitment);
- New needs for physical safety and mental wellbeing for staff as well as their satisfaction; and performance under the business continuity measures;
- Changes in the provision of goods and services i.e., public procurement procedures.

The study also aims to identify best practices and strategies in a comparative perspective and provide recommendations for the way forward.

The analysis covers seven European institutions: the European Parliament (EP), the European Commission (EC), the European Court of Justice (CJEU), the European Court of Auditors (ECA), the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS).

The analysis could not cover the Council, as would be desirable to cover the major EU institutions, due to lack of information. Moreover, the analysis does not cover decentralised agencies and delegations but only the headquarters.

Structure

The report follows the following structure, according to the research topics and sub-topics (criteria) agreed with the client.

Table 1: Report structure

Research topic	Sub-topics
Business continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges faced • Business continuity plan effectiveness • Teleworking • Building and workspace policy • Staff recruitment • IT tools and Infrastructure
Inter-institutional cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Means of cooperation and operational synergies
Public procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goods and services purchased • Simplification and innovation
Staff productivity and performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Productivity and performance • Workload and work-life balance • Team empowerment

Research topic	Sub-topics
Staff health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measures to support staff health • Health protocols • Other measures

For each topic, the content is presented in three sub-sections:

- Results of the desk analysis;
- Results of the expert consultations (interviews, Delphi analysis, focus group);
- Key findings.

Methodology

The content and findings of the final report are the result of:

DATA COLLECTION



An extensive desk analysis mainly based on the administrative documentation from the EU institutions available online and/or provided by the EP (see list in Annex 1). Overall, the research team has collected more than 80 documents and paid particular attention to the responses to the discharge questionnaires given by the EU institutions as well as their annual activity reports.



Semi-structured interviews with senior staff members from six of the seven analysed EU institutions (all excluding the EEAS¹), with a focus on HR and IT services, as well as Secretary General cabinets.

VALIDATION OF RESULTS



A simplified Delphi analysis² based on an online consultation of HR and IT services, as well as Secretary General cabinets. The purpose of the exercise was to validate the study teams' preliminary conclusions based on the desk analysis and interviews. The analysis covered business continuity plans, human resources, inter-institutional cooperation, workspace and building policy, and information technology.

An online focus group with ten staff members from four EU institutions (CJEU, ECA, EESC, EP)³ who discussed the study team's preliminary conclusions from the desk analysis and interviews, as well as future trends spurred by the pandemic. The discussion covered human resources, inter-institutional cooperation, workspace and building policy, and information technology.

¹ Due to the war in Ukraine, EEAS staff experienced a significant surge in workload and could not schedule time for an interview.

² The Delphi method is a structured communication technique or method, originally developed as a systematic, interactive forecasting method which relies on a panel of experts. These experts answer questions or validate conclusions/assumptions.

³ All institutions were invited.

The analysis relied on a robust approach of data management, based on the creation of databases enabling:

- Documents classified by type (questionnaire, annual activity report, report on budgetary and financial management, etc...) and by EU institution.
- Information retrieval on each research topic per each EU institution, due to direct links to the document and page, to always ensure information 'tracking'.
- New information from interviews to complement the desk analysis in a consistent and coherent manner.

This approach enabled two types of analysis:

- Horizontal, where the EU institutions are compared and differences in their approaches / solutions can be better spotted.
- Vertical, where common and general observations provide overall insights on the resilience of each EU institution.

2. CHALLENGES

In the European Union, as in the rest of the World, the COVID-19 pandemic deeply impacted public and private organisations including large enterprises, SMEs, national ministries, regions and municipalities. The effects were unprecedented and organisational disruptions varied considerably across different organisations. In the short term, lockdowns and reduced work capacity interrupted business routine and caused considerable delays. In the medium term, during the stop-and-go phasing out of emergency measures, almost all organisations had to reinvent their internal work processes, accelerating digitalisation and teleworking. These changes had, have and will have a profound impact on organisations.

European institutions went through the same general crisis path as other organisations, being forced, in the short term, to take emergency measures related to their buildings or to prepare new working arrangements and to upgrade their business continuity plans.

Some specific issues were instead related to their roles, where the suspension of institutional meetings risked to jeopardise the decision-making process and democratic functioning.

Table 2 below details the common and specific challenges faced by the EU institutions in the short and medium term.

Table 2: Common issues for organisations and EU institutions

Period	Challenges	General / common to all organisations (public/private)	Specific to EU Institutions
Short	Immediate Emergency Measures	Emergency measures (access to buildings, cleaning procedures, medical responses) Travel restrictions	Suspend institutional meetings and identify alternative ways to ensure democratic functioning
	ICT and infrastructure risks	Assess the readiness and, if needed, upgrade ICT infrastructure and services for more employees to work remotely Check internal routines that can be managed remotely	Ensure inter-institutional interoperability Set up digital and secure access for non-EU staff (e.g. EP Members)
	Employee risks	Analyse key roles that require on-site access Help employees with stress management Reassign staff to compensate for absences	
Medium	Business and operational risks	Make arrangements for work that cannot be done remotely, implement recovery plans Establish emergency measures and organisational instructions based on risk to ensure operational continuity Update business continuity plans	Prepare to close offices and facilities (e.g., EU delegations) outside the EU

Period	Challenges	General / common to all organisations (public/private)	Specific to EU Institutions
	Communication risks	<p>Keep communication with employees positive</p> <p>Establish external communication with suppliers and public</p>	<p>Establish communication with other EU institutional partners, national, regional and local authorities, as well as social and economic stakeholders</p>

Source: own elaboration on Deloitte⁴ Business Continuity Planning for a pandemic outbreak

EU specific challenges relate to individual institutional functions and missions (see table 3 below).

Table 3: Specific challenges related to each EU institution

Institution	Challenges
European Parliament	COVID-19 restrictions were a major challenge for parliamentary democracy. This concerned safeguarding legislative and budgetary powers as well as political scrutiny ensuring compliance with rules on voting and EU decision making in an institution with 705 political Members (MEPs).
European Committee of the Regions	Involvement of local and regional authorities (LRAs) has been difficult. Plenary sessions with CoR members, meetings with LRAs as well as consultations with other EU institutions have been reduced or even cancelled.
European Economic and Social Committee	<p>The March plenary session was cancelled, as were several summits with stakeholders. Subsequent sessions were fully remote, initially challenging the smooth running of political activity.</p> <p>EESC mandate renewal in late 2020. Due to travel restrictions in October 2020, the constitutive plenary session was in hybrid format as was the onboarding of new members, which was particular challenging for IT staff.</p> <p>Members' preparatory work to draft opinions (e.g. study groups, stakeholder meetings) was stalled or made more difficult since they could not meet physically.</p>
European External Action Service	The EEAS, including the 144 EU Delegations and Offices around the world, had to repatriate 600,000 EU citizens and helped set up large-scale humanitarian assistance.
Court of Justice of the EU	During lockdowns, only hearings in written form were possible. The project 'Digital Justice during the pandemic' was developed, i.e. a videoconferencing system for deliberations of the judges and for judicial hearings. The latter allowed the representatives of the parties to intervene remotely with simultaneous interpretation. It was awarded a Prize for good administration for excellence in innovation by the European Ombudsman in June 2021.
European Commission	For shared management policies (i.e., Cohesion, rural development, etc.), on-the-spot audits could not be performed. Similarly, there were fewer missions and meetings with national and regional authorities.
European Court of Auditors	<p>Travel and sanitary restrictions reduced or delayed on-the-spot audits. Early in the pandemic, all publications were put on hold for several weeks.</p> <p>Ensuring safe teleworking for users and from an operational perspective was a major challenge in the sudden shift to digital. Cyber-threats were on the rise. This risk was managed by raising user awareness and by reinforcing security monitoring and threat hunting, including using new tools.</p>

Source: authors' elaboration.

⁴ Deloitte Business Continuity Planning for a pandemic outbreak Seven steps for pandemic preparedness (<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/cz/Documents/about-deloitte/BCM-Planning-Guideline-for-a-Pandemic-Outbreak.pdf>)

Particular challenges (see Table 3) are mainly connected with the EU decision-making framework which entails constant and deep relations with Member States and the main policy stakeholders. Naturally, travel and mobility restrictions caused two major difficulties:

- ➡ **Reach EU institution offices.** It was considered too risky for EU institutions to host and hold meetings with people coming from Member States. This limited plenary sessions, committees and commission meetings, delegations' meetings and political groups meetings for the European Parliament, the CoR and the EESC. For the European Court of Justice, hearings were impossible during the first two months of the pandemic.
- ➡ **Travel to Member States.** Mobility restrictions forced EU personnel to suspend their missions abroad. This impacted audit visits for the European Court of Auditors. For the European Commission, shared management (i.e., DG REGIO, DG EMPL, DG MARE, DG AGRI) missions decreased, including coordination meetings and audit visits. Similarly, missions outside the EP's three working places have been reduced after February 2020.

A significant challenge related to the pandemic has been the repatriation of EU staff and citizens from outside the European Union. This exceptional intervention was implemented by the EEAS with the collaboration of EU delegations and enabled the return of 600,000 citizens.

3. BUSINESS CONTINUITY

This chapter illustrates key issues that EU institutions faced during the pandemic along with measures to ensure business continuity. Working arrangements, investments in IT infrastructure, changes to the office environment and human resource management have been analysed to understand how continuity has been ensured for EU institutions. The chapter answers the first research question ‘*What crisis and business continuity measures were put in place by EU institutions?*’ and includes the following sections:

- Business continuity plan effectiveness,
- Teleworking – period of implementation, working arrangements and future perspectives,
- Building management,
- Staff recruitment, and
- IT tools and infrastructure.

Business continuity plan effectiveness

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ Most institutions found their Business Continuity Plans effective to tackle the COVID-19 emergency in 2020.
- ➔ BCPs need to be more agile, allowing quicker decision-making, and covering more scenarios. A deep reflection on updating BCPs is underway.
- ➔ New BCPs should better define responsibilities and improve internal communication channels.
- ➔ For political bodies (EP, EESC, CoR), particular attention was needed to ensure administrative and political continuity, ensuring that political activity and the EU decision-making process were in no way compromised.
- ➔ The emergency COVID-19 task forces established by most institutions can be considered a good practice.

The majority of EU institutions had business continuity plans before the pandemic. The perceived effectiveness is intended as the capacity of the plans to facilitate the response to the emergency.



The only EU institution with no specific information on a business continuity plan was the EEAS. In the other cases, respondents state that their continuity plans were crucial to ensure basic functioning and a quick restoration of operational routines.

The CoR and the EESC assessed their Business Continuity Plan as not perfectly adequate for the COVID-19 emergency, requiring a revision. However, other institutions, even if satisfied with their plan, revised it, drawing lessons from the pandemic.

Beside the business continuity plans, EU institutions established ad-hoc teams for emergency management, introducing exceptional changes in their governance using a similar model based on two bodies:

1. A 'top management' unit (committee, board or centre) to ensure the continuity of internal decision making in connection with the emergency.
2. A technical unit (or task force unit) responsible for operational functioning including expertise in HR management, logistics, health and ICT. This technical unit implemented decisions taken by the 'top management unit'.



The effectiveness of the BCPs was largely confirmed by the EU staff members interviewed. Most said their BCP could be used or adapted to the COVID-19 crisis. For some, the existing BCP allowed the institution to be in a solid position to deal with the emergency. This is particularly true for the CJEU where the BCP contained an explicit reference to pandemics (avian flu) describing the actions to be carried out. The procedures ensured continuity of the institution's judicial mission as well as critical administrative activities.

According to the EP, the maturity of the institution's Business Continuity system was key to the appropriate management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most of the other interviewed institutions deemed their BCPs effective, albeit with revisions required in the light of experience and lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, the EESC found the BCP too 'heavy' to handle the scope and pace of decision-making. Although it had been adapted following the 2016 terrorist attacks, it did not foresee a pandemic. Alignment with the CoR, with which they share services (IT, logistics) and premises, was an additional challenge which was largely met.

Box 1: Insights from the EESC

A business continuity plan was already in place at the start of 2020 to handle a range of different crises. This plan had been adapted after the terrorist attacks in the metro in 2016 but it was impossible to foresee every type of scenarios and it proved to be unsuitable for the exceptional pandemic situation, as it was too heavy to handle the scope and pace of the decision-making. However, the BCP was very valuable and managed to keep the Committee abreast with the fast-changing measures and to make sure actions were taken complying both with Belgium legislation and with EU Treaties.

Source: interview with the Secretary-General's Team

Box 2: Insights from the CoR

The pandemic caught everybody by surprise, but the BCP worked quite well and provided a solid basis at the beginning. Good routines and coordination could be established. However, there were shortcomings and the BCP will need to be adapted to find a more streamlined approach to crisis management and clearer lines of command.

Source: interview with the Secretary-General Cabinet

For political bodies (EP, CoR, EESC), striking a balance between administrative continuity and political activity meant that greater effort and flexibility was needed.

Both Committees as well as the ECA agree that BCPs need to be re-designed to become more agile, to provide quicker responses and immediate actions with clearer decision-making procedures and 'lines of command' in case of emergency, as well as more efficient internal communication.

Furthermore, the updated plans need to include a wider and more comprehensive range of crisis scenarios, such as the pandemic, to enhance the responsiveness and flexibility of EU institutions.

Teleworking

The following paragraphs provide an overview of measures taken by EU institutions in relation to teleworking, in particular the:

- implementation period,
- working arrangements (flexibility), and
- future perspectives.

Period of implementation

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ For all the EU institutions, teleworking started on 16 March 2020.
- ➔ The return to office started from summer 2020, with some EU institutions setting ceilings to ensure institutional activities.
- ➔ Working modalities and presence were more systematically regulated in 2021.

For all the EU institutions, teleworking started on **16 March 2020**, as premises were inaccessible except for those performing essential functions. These functions were generally building, cleaning, IT and security services but also nurseries, close protection officers and drivers, where the work was incompatible with working from home.



Decisions on office presence were taken in close cooperation with national public authorities based on the health situation in the country. In some cases, ad hoc task forces (e.g. at the EC and EEAS) were established to deal with the response to the pandemic and to define rules and guidelines on working modalities.

In particular, returning to the office started from summer 2020, with some EU institutions setting ceilings to ensure institutional activities. For instance, the CJEU introduced thresholds for court staff of 50% and for service staff of 35% from September 2020 to ensure continued judicial activity, while initially the access policy was adjusted in different phases in cooperation with the Luxembourg authorities.

While in 2020 teleworking remained the norm in most EU institutions, albeit with an option to return to the office, working modalities and presence were more systematically regulated in 2021.

Table 4: Schemes and ceilings for returning to the office

						
<u>July 2021</u> Three modes: standard, moderate, maxi	<u>April 2021</u> Progressive phases to return to the 'new normal'	<u>June 2021</u> Ceilings for presence (20%-50% of working time)	<u>June 2020</u> Hybrid scheme	<u>April 2020</u> Gradual return	<u>Sept 2020</u> Ceilings for presence (35%-50%)	<u>June 2020</u> Ceilings for return to office (10% - 50%)

Source: own elaboration from the Discharge Questionnaires to EU institutions, 2020.

For instance, in July 2021 the Parliament introduced three modes for all eligible staff to be chosen on a voluntary basis. Standard was one day per week; moderate was two days per week and maxi three days per week.

Similarly, at the CoR, staff were encouraged to gradually come to the office in compliance with overall ceilings. This started with a day minimum per week until September 2021 (with a first ceiling of 20% and a second, in September, of 50%), increasing the minimum presence for all staff to two days a week (with a ceiling of 50%).

Working arrangements

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ The adjustments resulted in a greater flexibility for staff and were meant to support people when schooling and care arrangements were unavailable
- ➔ Although all EU institutions managed to implement remote working extremely quickly, the shift was not equally smooth and immediate. Existing teleworking schemes and the availability of proper IT equipment affected the preparedness of the institutions to provide a working environment away from the office with the same level of security and equipment.
- ➔ In the case of political bodies, the shift to online and then hybrid political meetings was at times flagged as challenging.



With teleworking, the EU institutions had to adapt their working arrangements to the new circumstances. The adjustments resulted in a greater flexibility for staff and were meant to support people when schooling and care arrangements were unavailable.

Examples of flexibility measures were:

- Teleworking from outside place of employment or abroad
- Extended maternity leaves during the lockdowns.
- New rules for time-recording including up to 2 hours per day for childcare (ECA).
- Work time reduced by 50% for families with disabled children with no loss of income when facilities were closed (EP).

Overall, there is no doubt that the emergency measures, although temporary, influenced the way institutions work, especially relationships with staff. At the European Commission, for instance, the experience of the pandemic led to more flexible ways of working and shaped the new HR strategy (2022). More attention will be posed to supporting staff in changing working habits and to build more innovative office spaces, through better coordination and organisational efforts as well as new holistic approaches.

At the CJEU, also thanks to the existing teleworking regime, the Administrative Committee adopted a decision in July 2021 establishing a homeworking scheme enabling managers to authorise staff to work from home based on department guidelines. Its main objective is to balance the benefits coming from teleworking for staff and those related to the work environment (clearer communication and team building).

Although all EU institutions managed to implement remote working extremely quickly, the shift was not equally smooth and immediate. Existing teleworking schemes (and the availability of proper IT equipment) affected the preparedness of the institutions to provide a working environment away from the office with the same level of security and equipment.

For example, at the European Commission, DG DIGIT experts increased capacity for regular teleworkers from 3,000 to more than 30,000. Flexible working arrangements reduced part-time and parental leave by 10% in 2020.

The CJEU has had a teleworking regime since 2010, allowing certain staff to work from home under a mobile work policy (which includes laptop distribution). The ECA had experience innovation towards remote and digital work for audit activities.

The CoR was already moving towards more digital working but experienced difficulties in allowing staff to operate fully remotely, also because of a lack of teleworking culture.

Box 3: Insights from the CoR on the shift to teleworking

Telework was already a widely used working tool before the pandemic, but the necessary IT equipment, experience and teleworking culture were not yet present throughout the CoR. IT services deployed significant efforts to acquire, configure and deliver the relevant material to allow the whole institution to operate fully remotely and staff was quickly trained on the different online platforms.

Source: 2020 Discharge – The Committee of the Region reply to the 2020 discharge – Hearing: 8 November 2021.

While the majority had already some endowment to shift to teleworking, the EEAS had to speed up substantial investments in a very short timeframe to ensure the continuity of institutional activities.



The interviews confirm the desk analysis findings. Although occasional and structural telework was in place in the institutions, the pandemic suddenly accelerated the process, which implied shifts in budget and human resources. All institutions managed the transition successfully although at different pace, according to the level of preparedness, i.e. the IT infrastructure and teleworking schemes existing before the pandemic.

In addition, the shift from occasional to 100% teleworking meant much more attention needed to be placed on individual staff needs. For the EP, for instance, it became clear that staff members were experiencing different issues in relation to working from home, depending on their personal situation. Therefore, different needs and measures had to be taken into account. As a result, the focus had to be on flexibility.

In the case of political bodies, the shift to online and then hybrid meetings was at times flagged as challenging. Although there is consensus that the introduced IT tools for online political meetings (e.g. Interactio) have largely worked and managed to ensure the resumption of full political activity in compliance with the Treaties and the EU decision-making process, the lack of live social interaction has made it more difficult to find compromise (e.g. on amendments, on the adoption of legislation which was less likely unanimous). The question of reimbursement of Members in absence of physical travel was also signalled as a challenge by the EESC.

Box 4: Insights from the EESC

There was a particular challenge regarding political activity and democratic processes, also considering that members do not receive any remuneration from the Committee but are only entitled to the reimbursement of travel expenses and related allowances. Since travelling was not possible and physical meetings did not take place, prior to June 2020 members were not reimbursed for the time they spent performing their duties. The temporary decision taken by the Bureau on 9 June 2020 covered the reimbursement of the daily subsistence allowance for EESC members attending EESC meetings remotely⁵. This decision was necessary as a way to ensure business continuity and keep attendance rate sufficiently high and to ensure that a balanced geographical representation was respected, guaranteeing a democratic work as stated in the treaties⁶.

Source: Interview with the EESC Secretary-General's Team

Future perspectives

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ Hybrid working will continue to be a reality for EU staff. This option should be kept also to stay competitive in the job market.
- ➔ The fast paradigm shift to hybrid working implies not only a preparedness in terms of equipment (IT, home office etc.) but also an important shift in mindset and the ability to fully adapt to the new working modalities.
- ➔ New skills for managing people in hybrid working settings have already been developed, the past two years have been a 'training'. The shift is towards evaluating performance based on results.
- ➔ The budget effects are perceived differently by the institutions. For many, the additional costs and investments for teleworking, especially for new IT equipment and software licenses, largely took place in 2020.



The interviews and the focus group discussion proved how the pandemic brought a paradigm shift in working modalities that would not have taken place otherwise, or not so suddenly. While institutions have gradually encouraged the partial return to the office since 2021, hybrid working (i.e. a combination of working from an office provided by the employer and teleworking) will continue to be a reality for all, entailing a number of changes that are already underway or planned as well as challenges and deeper reflections which will take more time to solve, internalise and put into practice.

For instance, managers have had to acquire new skills to manage staff remotely and now in a hybrid setting, shifting towards an evaluation of performance based on results. The past two years have already been a 'training', but updates, stocktaking, and adaptation to refine the ways of working will regularly be needed.

⁵ In July 2021 the Council adopted the EESC proposal to disburse to the remotely participating members half of the standard daily subsistence allowance

⁶ Both EESC and CoR members receive daily allowances for meetings in presence. Although with different approaches and procedures, both Committees have resorted to solutions to overcome the obstacles of missing allowances for remote meetings.

At the same time, the fast shift to hybrid working implied not only a preparedness to satisfy organisational needs in terms of equipment (IT, home office etc.) which have already been largely met, but also an important shift in mindset and the ability to fully adapt to the new working modalities. An example is provided by the new reality of hybrid meetings, i.e. when part of the staff attends a meeting from the office and another part remotely, leading to a different experience and perception of the meeting (with staff participating remotely being more at risk of 'isolation', having issues with the connection or the software), leading to a 'second class' participation compared to in-office peers and a risk of not having the same impact. New attitudes as well as skills will need to be developed in this sense.

Some new decision-making and reflection structures to prepare for and design the 'new world of working' in EU institutions have been established. However there is little information available through desk analysis and collected through consultation of senior staff, especially details of governance and structures put in place.

In 2021, the ECA started to reflect on 'post-Covid times' and needs of the institution, e.g. defining new working arrangements. The Secretary General's office thus consulted with staff, managers and members to determine new arrangements. At the same time, the practices of other institutions were observed. A new internal decision on hybrid working was taken in summer 2021, very much influenced by the rules and schemes in the EC and EP at the time.

New political structures were also created. For instance, an ad hoc group was set up by the EESC, including the President and the Bureau, to prepare a way out of the crisis and a committee for the 'new normal'. They have worked with a holistic approach, discussing measures to put in place, meeting prioritisation, modified language regimes in meetings, etc.



The additional costs related to teleworking/hybrid working (IT equipment, software licences) were mostly at the beginning of the pandemic, i.e. 2020. Significant budget changes are not expected in the future.

Building and workspace policy

KEY FINDINGS








- ➔ General building management measures were introduced in all institutions to mitigate the risk of infection. In addition, two institutions (the CJEU and the ECA) implemented new specific measures, i.e. projects converting and creating adequate workspace.
- ➔ The pandemic boosts a general re-thinking of the workspace in all EU Institutions based on the so called 3Bs: 'behaviour, bricks and bytes'.
- ➔ There is general consensus that workspace is being or will be redesigned to adapt to the new working modalities. In particular, the existence of permanent working stations will in many cases be replaced by flexible, moving ones. How these spaces should be organised is still under debate, but a frequent objective is to have open collaborative spaces (e.g. in the EC).

The pandemic and the shift to general teleworking generated several impacts on the use of premises and buildings across the EU institutions.



These are reflected in measures to ensure health security in the workplace. Table 6 below summarises the measures taken by each institution.

Table 5: Building management measures

	 European Parliament	 European Commission	 European Committee of the Regions	 European Economic and Social Committee		 CVRIA	 EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS
General building management measures							
Specific projects							
New rules for access							

Source: Discharge Questionnaires to EU institutions, 2020.

General building management measures were introduced in all institutions to mitigate the risk of infection. These include separate entrances and exits, plexiglass screens and thermal sensors. Beyond the physical interventions, the institutions introduced new rules for access to buildings. These include:

- Laissez passer certificates for staff in essential functions and new registration systems for presence (EESC and EEAS);
- New mechanism for monitoring staff presence. For example, the EC set-up the 'Return to the office' system, within the Commission's HR system (SYSPER). It allows staff to record their intended days in the office in advance and to check the building capacity limits; and
- Valid COVID-19 certificate to enter the building and temperature checks at the entrances, (the European Parliament introduced them in 2021).

In addition to the general measures, two institutions (the CJEU and the ECA) implemented projects converting and creating adequate workspace.

At the CJEU the projects included converting some rooms to ensure juridical activities (courtroom, a secured archive and space for visitors).

At the ECA, some changes in workspace organisation were already in place, particularly the renewal of the K2 building, where works were easier in the absence of most staff (several floors could be renovated in parallel). In the K3 building several areas were refurbished to anticipate the new working modalities.

In addition to the on-going building policy, in 2021 the ECA launched a study 'K2030. Reimagining our workplace' which is expected to provide insights on the future of their oldest building, taking into consideration the new hybrid way of working.

Eventually, the pandemic boosted a general re-thinking of the workspace in all EU Institutions based on the so called 3Bs: *behaviour, bricks and bytes*. In some Institutions this accelerated an already ongoing reflection (e.g. the EC communication *The Workplace of the Future in the European Commission*). In some other EU Institutions, the changed working modalities initiated a revision of the building policy investments.



There is general consensus that workspace is being or will be redesigned to adapt to the new working modalities, i.e. to hybrid working. In particular, the existence of permanent working stations (private or semi-private offices) will in many cases be replaced by flexible, moving ones, facilitated by the fact that now everyone has been provided with a laptop. How these spaces should be organised is still under debate, but the most frequent objective is to have open collaborative spaces (e.g. for the European Commission). At the same time, a certain reluctance by staff to leave fixed offices for a 'hot desk' work scenario has been observed and it might take time to adjust to this new reality.

Box 5: Good practice from the ECA



A study launched in 2021 named 'K2030. Reimagining our workplace' aims at deciding on the future of our oldest building taking into consideration the new hybrid way of working. The emergence of new technological possibilities such as the 'meta' technologies has an impact on digital working environments and requires the adjustment of strategies and methods.

Source: interview with the ECA Office of the Secretary-General



Budget savings from the new workspace and building policies will not be universal. According to the EC, reorganising buildings will bring significant savings in rent, though the other institutions do not share this view.

Staff recruitment

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ 2020 was an exceptional year and EU institutions had to adapt standard procedures to ensure continued recruitment. All the recruitment processes shifted to digital with remote selection procedures and paperless workflows.
- ➔ Staff recruitment has been guaranteed in full.
- ➔ The recruitment process did not change substantially after the peak of the pandemic. In the future, final recruitment interviews and decisions will keep taking place at the institution premises rather than online.
- ➔ There is, however, a major shift to digital and paperless for the application phase and the internal (HR service) management of the selection process.



In 2020, the EU institutions had to adapt standard procedures to ensure continued recruitment. All the recruitment processes (from interviews to entry into service) shifted to digital with remote selection procedures and paperless workflows.

Box 6: Insights from the CoR on recruitment

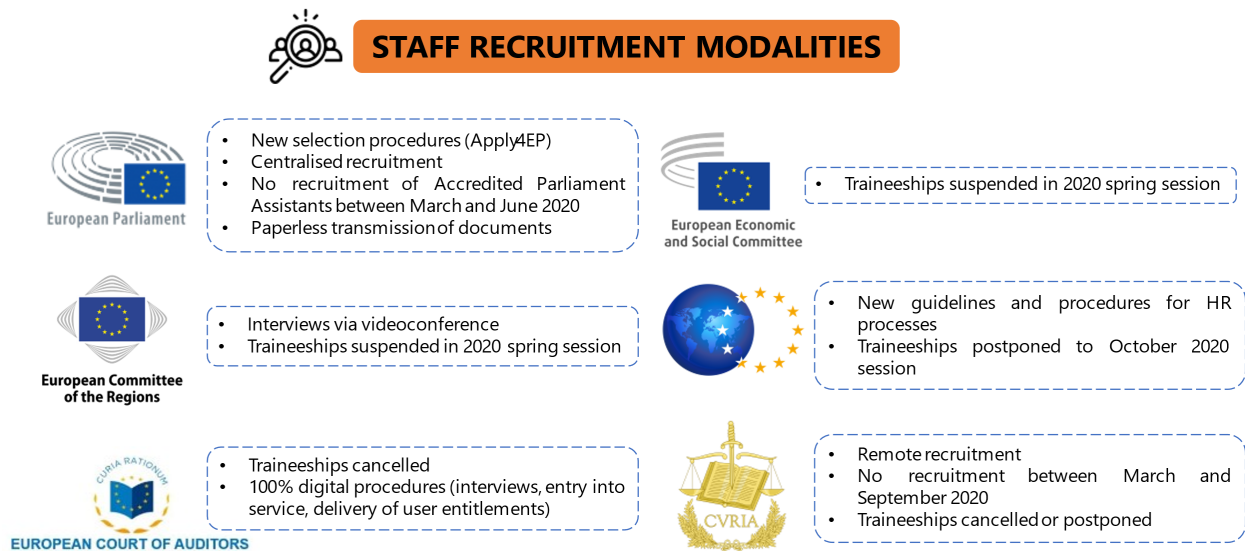
2020 was an exceptional year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused issues for cross border travel within the EU. The CoR quickly adapted its practices, mandating remote interviews via videoconference for all its recruitment procedures, thus ensuring that candidates from all over the EU were able to participate in all recruitment procedures on an equal footing.

Source: 2020 Discharge, Questionnaire to the European Committee of the Regions, Hearing of 8 November 2021.

As an example, at the EP a new IT tool (Apply4EP) manages online applications, with written and oral tests through remote participation. The new procedure has improved the process and the number of parliament competitions, and selection procedures doubled in 2020.

Staff recruitment has been guaranteed in full by all the institutions with the exception of trainees in the spring session 2020 and the temporary suspension of recruitment for Accredited Parliament Assistants between March and April 2020.

Figure 1: Staff recruitment modalities per institution (desk analysis)



Interviewees and focus group participants agree that the recruitment process did not change substantially after the peak of the pandemic. In the future, final recruitment interviews and decisions will again take place at the institution premises rather than online.

It has been mentioned that remote recruitment could also create inequalities due to different settings and equipment at home and infrastructure (e.g. Internet connection) in Member States and regions.



No significant budget variations related to staff recruitment were identified in the desk analysis or consultations with EU institutions.

IT tools and infrastructure

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ All institutions managed to provide staff with the necessary IT equipment during the sudden shift to teleworking in March 2020. The pace and difficulty of the transition depended on the level of preparedness before the pandemic (e.g. percentage of staff already equipped to telework).
- ➔ The shift to digital, also in terms of workflows and procedures, had already been planned pre-pandemic but was not meant to occur so quickly. It is now important to identify the gaps and strategically plan what else needs to be digitalised.
- ➔ IT has proved to be a highly integrated sector among institutions, greater efficiencies were achieved thanks to coordination at strategic level.
- ➔ Additional investments are needed even though to a minor extent, with most investments already made in 2020.
- ➔ Cybersecurity will be a key challenge in the future, as cybersecurity threats are directly linked to the advancement in technology and are especially relevant in a hybrid working environment and with the intensive use of Cloud computing and data storage.
- ➔ User awareness programmes are being implemented and updated.



The pandemic has been a catalyst for digital transformation, pushing all the institutions to take measures to ensure they function at political and administrative levels. Consistently with these challenges, the response of the EU institutions can be grouped into three types of intervention:

- Provision of ICT equipment for all staff;
- Shift of internal procedures to digital (procurement, recruitment, etc.);
- Transformation of training, audit and judicial activities to remote work.

Some of the institutions (the EC, ECA and CJEU) were already equipped for remote working thanks to existing policies on workplaces. Others had to urgently structure projects and initiatives to purchase and distribute laptops and implement other teleworking arrangements.

Box 7: Insight from the ECA on IT equipment

In 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, we haven't provided staff with special work from home equipment. We authorised them to bring the equipment from office to home, mainly screens, keyboard, mouse and chair, with the idea of improving the ergonomics of the home office. As all ECA staff is fully equipped with laptops since 2013, there was no need to distribute extra equipment.

Source: 2020 Discharge, Questionnaire to the European Court of Auditors, Hearing of 8 November 2021.



In addition to the transformation to working from home, important changes in digitalisation concerned internal procedures and the management of certain administrative processes (such as procurement and recruitment).

All the institutions were affected by a full shift from paper to digital (*dematerialisation*), already integrated within digital strategies for years, which was accelerated by the pandemic.

Digital transformation allowed the EU bodies to pursue their institutional missions. Important innovation in all of them ensured continued decision-making at EU level with new tools for voting and meetings and reinforced videoconferencing systems. For example, the CJEU designed a single, secure videoconferencing system with potentially simultaneous interpretation from and into the 24 official languages so party representatives unable to travel to Luxembourg could participate.

At the ECA, the audit activities moved to digital and special attention was given to cybersecurity with the introduction of security-monitoring and threat-hunting systems, digital certificates issued by a public Certification Authority for email encryption and threat protection software for corporate mobile devices.

Table 6: IT related measures (desk analysis)

	 European Parliament		 European Committee of the Regions	 European Economic and Social Committee		 CVRIA	 EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS
Individual teleworking equipment	Roll-out of hybrid computers and IT support reinforced Teleworking equipment	95% of staff already equipped for digital workplace	Laptops to all staff, headsets on demand	Laptops to all staff which will gradually replace desktops in offices.	All staff provided with laptops Fully mobile solution with a secure connection	95% of staff with suitable equipment for teleworking	Existing policy 'Laptop for everybody' Remote VPN and access tokens
Digital internal procedures	Shift from paper to digital processes Electronic signature for agreements Strategic project to boost digitalisation			Dematerialisation of working methods (financial circuits, invoice payments) Electronic signature for agreements	Solutions to support digital working environment ICT steering committee		New tools for administrative workflows, communication, recruitment
External functioning	Remote voting Online debating and participation tools Multilingual videoconferencing	Multilingual videoconferencing	New tools for online meetings (Interactio) New voting system (EU survey) COVID-19 exchange platform Multilingual videoconferencing	External communication fully digital Multilingual videoconferencing			Remote auditing using video conferencing and other IT (secure data and document sharing)



Interviewees and focus group participants agree that the pandemic has exceptionally accelerated the digitalisation of workflows and processes within the organisations. In most if not all institutions, the related changes and investments leading to an increased digitalisation were already planned but were not expected to occur so quickly or extensively (e.g. a multiannual roll-out plan for the replacement of desktop computers with hybrid ones was planned by DG ITEC in the EP). Looking into the future, digitalisation will continue as it is an evolutive process. There is a need to consolidate and leverage on what has been achieved in the past two years, identify the gaps in digitalisation that have not been covered yet and strategically plan ahead focusing on those, as well as on the new challenges arising as a result of digitalisation.

A key challenge observed which has increased with the sudden shift to digital is cybersecurity. This will continue to be a priority issue for IT services, as it is closely linked to the advancement in technology and the transition to cloud computing and data storage. A greater awareness and engagement of IT end users will be required. Awareness programmes for staff have already been implemented and updated. In parallel, IT staff will have to develop new skills and new job profiles will be created to tackle the increasing threats. To this end, IT budget will have to be planned so as to mirror this priority.

Box 8: Insights from the ECA

Ensuring a safe teleworking experience both from the user's side and from an operational perspective was a major challenge in the sudden shift to digital. ECA had to boost user awareness about the cybersecurity risks related to telework, through training and communication. On the other hand, the vulnerability management process had to be streamlined for a quicker mitigation of software flaws in the VPN systems and other critical IT systems, which became a preferred target of cyber-threat actors. The pandemic has been a catalyst of the evolution to a 'Zero-Trust Architecture' (ZTA), a new cybersecurity paradigm based on an acknowledgement that threats exist both inside and outside traditional network boundaries. As a result, the evolution to ZTA is considered one of the strategic goals of ECA's cyber-security plan.

Source: Interview with the IT service of the European Court of Auditors

Furthermore, the deep changes in the mindset of staff, with special regard to senior staff, regarding the extensive use of paperless, digital procedures and workflows were not a given before the pandemic. According to most institutions, there was a strong initial resistance at managerial level to these changes, partly due to the uncertainty regarding the extent and duration of the crisis. This was overcome and the changes have now been internalised as part of the 'new normal' for most staff at all levels. The uptake and update of the necessary IT skills by all staff to keep up with the evolving technologies for the new work environment will need to be monitored but keeping the right attitude and mindset towards the shift to digital will be key.

This aspect will have to be dealt with more broadly at HR level as there is also a need to hire IT specialists with new specific competences which are highly demanded by the market (e.g. cybersecurity, cloud computing).

In general, the strong inter-institutional cooperation and coordination among IT services to swiftly adapt to the new circumstances and challenges has been praised. This high integration of services existed before and will continue beyond the crisis.



The greatest budget impact from IT investments to allow the shift to digital was in 2020. Some new investment is needed in the coming years, principally to recruit high skilled personnel, but the overall impact is minor.

Box 9: Good practice from the EP



In 2021, DG ITEC defined a 'post-COVID vision' based on the following key pillars:

- 1) *Hybrid: or the ability to transition from physical to digital environments as seamlessly as possible (i.e. it doesn't matter where you are, with what you work, you're still part of the EP digital environment).*
- 2) *Intelligent: or the ability to deliver different flavours of the same service to better match users' preferences and savviness (self-service, desk service, personalised/advanced service). Intelligent both refers to the possibilities of automation and analytics, but also to the smart way of using our resources, by being there when it matters for the users and let them do when they want and know how to do it.*
- 3) *Confident and Secure: or the need to have compliance and cybersecurity by-design in the production chain, but also to provide confidence to the users and clients (i.e. that they have all the knowledge/info they need in order to keep the overall environment sustainable and safe).*

Source: Interview with the DG ITEC, EP

Box 10: Good practice from the CJEU



The e-Curia application, which allows electronically filing and exchanging procedural documents since 2011, has proven to be a major asset in the context of the health crisis: by ensuring the dematerialisation of document flows, it has contributed to the continuity of the activity of the registries of both the Court of Justice and the General Court. The usefulness of this tool during the pandemic is demonstrated, among other things, by the very significant increase in the number of accounts opened by national courts (223 accounts at the end of 2021, compared to 121 accounts at the end of 2020 and 45 accounts at the end of 2019).

Source: Interview with the IT service of the CJEU

4. INTER-INSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION

This chapter reviews the research question on inter-institutional cooperation efforts during the health crisis and provide insights on cooperation and synergies regarding the new health and staff measures across institutions.

Cooperation and synergies

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ Inter-institutional cooperation took various forms from March 2020 to achieve different objectives. These can be summarised as: Regular inter-institutional meetings to exchange information on the evolving health crisis and to coordinate measures (e.g. on business continuity); Inter-institutional service meetings to coordinate on specific matters; Joint operational measures on new IT systems and procedures.
- ➔ Inter-institutional cooperation and coordination during the crisis were largely considered effective.
- ➔ The inter-institutional Medical Board has been praised as key to ensuring the coordination of institutions on the medical aspects of the crisis.
- ➔ The coordination between the CoR and EESC was particularly integrated due to the sharing of services and premises.



Inter-institutional cooperation took various forms from March 2020 to achieve different objectives. These can be summarised as:

- Regular inter-institutional meetings to exchange information on the evolving health crisis and to coordinate measures (e.g. on business continuity)
- Inter-institutional service meetings to coordinate on specific matters and
- Joint operational measures on new IT systems and procedures.

The European Commission set up an inter-institutional group to exchange information and coordinate. This met regularly throughout 2020 at top and senior management level.

Box 11: Insights from the EC on COVID-19 coordination

An inter-institutional group for the exchange of information and coordination on COVID-19 within the Preparatory Committee for Questions Related to the Staff Regulations was established in March 2020 and met 48 times during 2020. The group is chaired by the Commission and comprises representatives of the administrations of all European Institutions and Bodies as well as the European Investment Bank, the European Agencies Network, the European Patent Office, the European Stability Mechanism and the Secretariat-General of the European Schools.

Source: 2020 Discharge to the Commission - Written Questions to Commissioner Hahn, Hearing of 6 December 2021.

These meetings were the most mentioned across institutions as a key tool to share information, documentation, best practices as well as to coordinate approaches and ensure coherence in handling the pandemic.

As outlined by the EP, *'The various cooperation mechanisms have been instrumental to achieve coordinated actions, such as receiving the necessary authorisations from the Belgian authorities for the opening of testing centres and accredited COVID-19 vaccination centres in the Institutions, or in the framework of joint procurement procedures for the purchase of personal protection equipment'*⁷.

Regular meetings were also organised to coordinate decisions and operations regarding IT, such as videoconferencing systems, cloud usage, cybersecurity, etc.

Box 12: Insights from the CJEU on cooperation

On the IT aspect, the CJEU also maintained regular contact with the other institutions in two inter-institutional bodies:

- *Inter-institutional Committee for Digital Transformation in which different topics to support the institutions' activity during the pandemic were tackled: videoconferencing, electronic signature, cloud usage.*
- *CERT_EU in which the cooperation for cybersecurity was coordinated and ensured. This cooperation was very valuable considering the fact that during this time the cyberattacks had intensified.*

Source: 2020 Discharge Questionnaire to the European Court of Justice, Hearing of 8 November 2021.

Services in charge of business continuity liaised with their counterparts in other institutions. The EP Business Continuity and Management Unit organised external training, for the purpose of certification, for five business continuity managers and liaised with managers from other institutions and bodies to coordinate and harmonise measures taken to face the pandemic, with more than 100 informal interactions in 2020.

Doctors from the various institutions also had regular exchanges within the Inter-institutional Medical Board and the Advisory Scientific Board meetings, starting from 6 February 2020.

The CoR and EESC cooperated intensively. The two institutions share premises and have joint services. They jointly purchased personal protective equipment (masks, sanitising gel, etc.), coordinated telework arrangements and the vaccination campaign for staff.



The consulted institutions largely agree on the effectiveness of the coordination mechanisms put in place since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, the inter-institutional Medical Board has been praised as key to ensuring the coordination of institutions on the medical aspects of the crisis, which were

obviously paramount. All except one institution agree that, while coordination was needed, an absolute standardisation of processes and solutions among all institutions was not possible nor necessary as each institution has its specific mission, constraints, activities and size and needs to adopt an approach in line with the specific needs of its services and staff. The coordination between the CoR and EESC was particularly integrated due to the sharing of services and premises, as mentioned above. The cooperation between them went beyond the Agreement in place at the time. This resulted in the drafting of a new Cooperation Agreement between the two institutions.

⁷ European Parliament. Information on the budgetary and the financial management of the European Parliament in 2020 and replies to the questionnaire in preparation for the EP discharge for 2020.

Box 13: Insights from the EESC

It is worth mentioning that a new cooperation agreement was signed on 20 October 2021 and entered into force on 1 November 2021 by which some areas of administrative cooperation will be strengthened by widening the services included in the Joint Services and deepening cooperation in other areas, such as IT financing and organisational structure. On a more practical level, the Committees are committed to optimise the use of space and to introduce meeting facilities. The new agreement will be in force until the end of 2026.

Source: Interview with the EESC Secretary-General's Team



No budget impact of inter-institutional cooperation was identified through desk analysis or consultations with the EU institutions.

5. PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

Goods and services purchased

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ EU institutions opened many negotiating procedures to purchase goods and service during the pandemic. Most of these were organised in compliance with EU rules and some required maximum flexibility without prior notification of the contract notice on the basis of urgency, as foreseen by the Financial Regulation.
- ➔ Such procurement flexibility was required in particular for three main categories: medical equipment, IT services/devices and studies.



This chapter addresses the research question on public procurement procedures in 2020. This area of administration has been significantly affected by the pandemic with the urgent need to purchase goods and services as well as the forced shift to digital procedures.

EU institutions used many negotiated procedures to purchase goods and services, in compliance with EU rules⁸. In some cases, they relied on the flexibility granted from the Financial Regulation⁹ allowing for the suspension of the need for prior notification of the contract notice on the basis of urgency.

The main categories of goods and services affected were medical, IT and studies.

Medical

- Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs), including face masks and hydro-alcoholic gel
- COVID-19 molecular analysis tests (PCR), antigen and serological sample tests
- Health related services
- Other goods: thermic cameras, disinfection wipes

Figure 2 below shows institutional spending by the four categories above. The analysis is based on contracts awarded in 2020, downloaded from EU institution websites (including TED). The data is not exhaustive as many contract notices were not published.

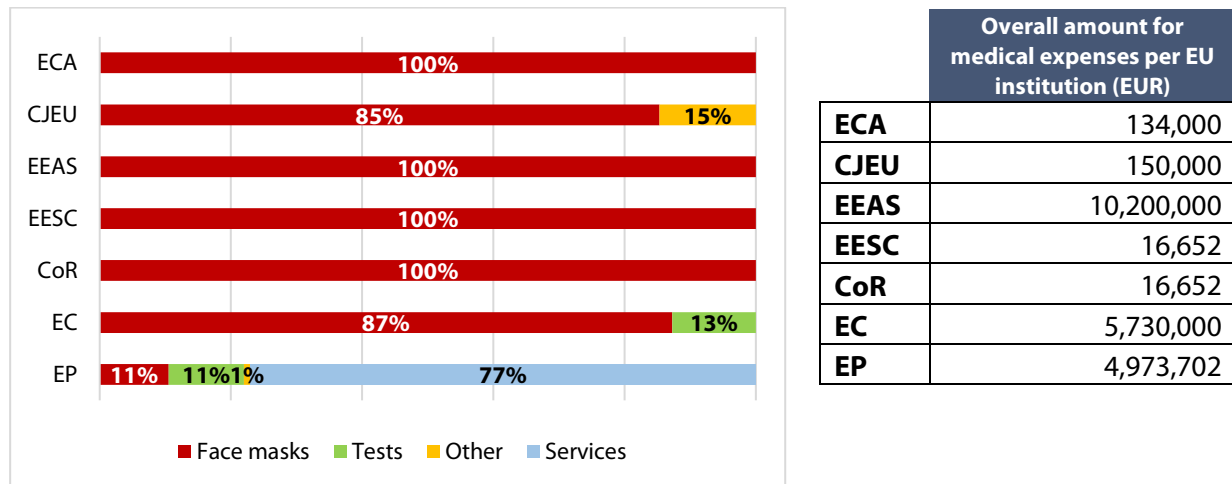
The contracts range from EUR 16,000 for CoR and EESC up to EUR 10.2 million for the EEAS, which was a joint procedure with the European Court of Auditors and the European Investment Bank. The majority of the expenses were for masks and tests.

In addition, EP expenditure classified as 'services' includes almost EUR 4 million to set up a COVID-19 testing centre in Brussels on Parliament's premises.

⁸ 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. Art 164.5(f).

⁹ Ibid, Annex I par. 11.

Figure 2: Medical expense per EU institution and its composition



Source: own elaboration from TED/ Institutions websites.

IT

From the list of contracts awarded in 2020 available on EU institution websites, it is not possible to identify those directly resulting from the pandemic and those already planned. However, from the discharge questionnaires it has emerged that some budget lines were directly impacted by the sudden and general shift to teleworking. The main budget lines requiring reinforcement were:

- 2100: IT equipment and software (such as laptops, screens and other accessories),
- 2102: IT services (including reinforcing infrastructure capacity such as data centres and network access to handle more users).

Box 14: Insights from the EP on teleworking equipment

In order to ensure proper working conditions for its staff during the mandatory teleworking period prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Parliament has provided all kinds of accessories ranging from screens to inter alia mice, keyboards and headsets. Parliament has also provided uncountable videoconferencing services accounts to support an exponential increase in virtual meetings.

Source: European Parliament, Information on the budgetary and the financial management of the European Parliament in 2020 and replies to the questionnaire in preparation for the EP discharge for 2020.

Studies and Research

An additional category for procurement concerned policy studies and research related to COVID-19 impacts. The need to gather data and analyse the policy consequences of the pandemic is reflected in several study contracts, explicitly addressing COVID-19. From the list of contracts awarded in 2020 and published in the EU institutions' websites, it turned out that the EP funded five studies about the impact of COVID-19 on several areas, namely the EU agriculture system and its resilience, fisheries and aquaculture, the cultural sector, tourism, and education and youth. Studies and research calls were launched by other institutions as well: three by the EESC, one each by the ECA and the EC.

Table 7: Value of contracts for studies and research (EUR)

	 European Parliament	 European Commission	 European Economic and Social Committee	 EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS
Research and studies	349,645	184,500	94,820	42,000

Source: TED/ Institution websites.

Simplification and innovation

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ Procurement procedures had to be organised urgently, requiring institutions to increase their capacity to launch calls for tender, deliver documents and provide public procurement advice. This was possible thanks to simplification measures in place prior to the pandemic which were accelerated or extended to other areas.
- ➔ The challenge now is to reinforce and expand the use of eTendering, eSubmission and digital signatures to other areas of administration and procurement, even after the pandemic.



European institutions had to urgently organise procurement and increase their capacity to launch calls for tender, deliver documents and provide public procurement advice. This was possible thanks to existing simplification measures which were accelerated or extended to other areas of procurement. For instance, the ECA has been using electronic signature since 2009 and this helped move procurement to fully digital.

Digitalisation has been crucial to ensuring business continuity. The shift from paper based to digital processes and electronic signatures has led to full digitalisation of a remarkable part of European Parliament administration. The challenge now is to reinforce and expand the use of eTendering, eSubmission and digital signatures to other administrative and procurement procedures. The administration is running a strategic project which will help in the shift towards a fully digitalised Parliament, by ensuring that documents are legally valid.

Box 15: Insights from the EP on eProcurement

In this context, the Public Procurement Forum has prepared guidelines for emergency use of digital signature during the pandemic, i.e. acceptance of contracts being signed with Advanced E-Signatures, which led to the instant digitalisation of a significant part of Parliament's administration around contract work in April 2020.

Source: European Parliament, Information on the budgetary and the financial management of the European Parliament in 2020 and replies to the questionnaire in preparation for the EP discharge for 2020.

The same applies to CoR which introduced electronic signatures and a new way of receiving offers. The pandemic was an incentive to simplify and digitalise outdated processes that were unsuitable for such urgent circumstances, a move that had been postponed for years by the Committee. Paperless

workflows, including eSubmission (starting from January 2021) and e-invoicing, increased efficiency and cut cumbersome procedures. However more than 90% of CoR procurement procedures fall outside the scope of eSubmission and thus need to be processed in the 'old' way.

It should be mentioned that in May 2022, the EC proposed targeted adjustments to the EU financial rules (the Financial Regulation). The proposal seeks to grant certainty to EU funds' recipients, while making the budget more responsive at times of crises and making budget management digital by default. Among other measures, the EC proposes to provide a clearer legal framework for procurement in crisis situations, for example by enabling the EU institutions to procure on behalf of the EU Member States or to act as a central purchasing body.

6. STAFF PRODUCTIVITY AND SATISFACTION

The following paragraphs review the research question on the impact of the pandemic and the measures taken for staff (e.g. teleworking) on productivity and satisfaction, in particular, three aspects have been investigated:

- Productivity and performance
- Workload and work-life balance and
- Team empowerment.

Productivity and performance

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ Most institutions report a positive teleworking experience for most staff with no significant influence on productivity.
- ➔ Obstacles to performance were linked to e.g., less suitable technical and logistical conditions than in the office, more difficulties in consulting colleagues etc.
- ➔ It was difficult for managers to adapt to the new ways of working, particularly when confronted with the need to evaluate staff performance differently than in the past.
- ➔ A shift in the evaluation of performance, and in managerial skills and mindset in general, is underway. Emphasis should increasingly be put on trust-based and result-oriented assessments.
- ➔ Trainings have been and will be important for staff to acquire new skills. The online format proved successful during the height of the pandemic and enabled to reach a wider audience but should not entirely replace in-person trainings, which are more effective for certain types of trainings.
- ➔ Particular attention should also be given to the design of training which takes into account new ways of learning, considering an approach where knowledge is acquired in a more fluid manner rather than in restricted timeframes and formats.



The analysis highlights positive conclusions from the crisis on staff productivity and performance. Most institutions report a positive teleworking experience for most staff with no significant influence on productivity.

The key challenges to performance and productivity as outlined for instance by CoR in a staff survey in 2020, concern decreased cooperation and teamwork, IT problems (e.g. internet connection, new software) and an increased workload.

For certain institutions and services, productivity was affected by travel restrictions including staff members whose work entails physical presence or missions abroad. For managers, the fast transition to teleworking often meant they needed to make an extra effort to manage teams remotely.

A paradigm shift accelerated by the pandemic which might positively affect future staff productivity and performance is the sharp increase of online training courses. This will impact learning methods in the long run with more 'blended' and tailor-made solutions for staff.



Most institutions agree that teleworking has not impacted staff performance negatively. On the contrary, most agree that staff has been more productive while working from home regardless of the difficulties encountered at the beginning of the crisis in order to adapt to the new circumstances. For instance, the staff surveys carried out by the CJEU in May 2020 and May 2021 identified advantages such as better concentration in carrying out certain tasks, and disadvantages e.g., less suitable technical and logistical conditions than in the office, more difficulties in consulting colleagues.

On the other hand, managers had to learn how to manage their teams in a fully remote setting. Many institutions provided training and support to adapt to the new environment. The Directorate-General for HR in the EP, for instance, provided conferences and a dedicated telephone line for managers. Similarly, the EC (DG HR) provided trainings, a Vademecum for managers and sent regular messages to middle managers. The CJEU has organised a series of training courses for managers on remote team management and management in times of crisis as well as courses on the 'Foundations of Human Management'.

The challenge of changing the management culture is crucial when looking into a future where hybrid working will be the new normal and none of the institutions plans to go back fully to the previous setting of full in-office work. The fast shift to telework for people who were used to managing teams in a 'traditional way' was indeed perceived as destabilising.

Box 16: Insights from the EESC

This new situation also requested a shift in the mindset, especially from a managerial point of view. New skills were required to handle a team from home, coordinating it and making sure that no one was left behind. From one day to another even managers against teleworking were forced to make it work. Even managers who used to be strong opponents of teleworking have changed their minds.

Source: Interview with the EESC Secretary-General's Team

One key issue is linked to how assess productivity and how to 'control' staff: the experience showed that full teleworking worked much better than expected, thanks to staff ethics and sense of responsibility. However, a change in managerial mindset and skills will be needed when managing teams in a hybrid setting, moving from an assessment of performance based on time inputs towards one that is trust-based and result-oriented. A management by objectives with easily measurable indicators should become the norm.

As concerns training, the pandemic has indeed spurred a shift towards online training, as it emerged from the desk analysis. This format allowed to reach a wider audience and make training courses more easily accessible (e.g. some training sessions which were normally organised in Brussels and could not be joined by EU staff in Luxembourg became available to staff in all locations). However, the consulted institutions agree that it is important to find a balance between in-person and online training. Some types of trainings, especially when focusing on soft skills, are more effective when provided in person. The accent should also not only be placed on the training location (on premises or online) but also on their design. Most training are still designed in a logic of the past, while attention should be given to new ways of learning and acquiring knowledge. In a world where information is constantly available, individuals are used to 'consuming knowledge' in small bits, scattered throughout the day or a period of time rather than concentrated in a specific timeframe. In this sense, 'hybrid' should be applied also to new training and learning methods.



No substantial budget changes from productivity and performance were identified through desk analysis or consultations with EU institutions. Future training might have some or no impact on the budget, as many training courses have become cheaper as they are now online.

Workload and work-life balance

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ Increased workload and negative effects on work-life balance were reported during full lockdowns in 2020, especially at the beginning of the pandemic.
- ➔ Increased attention was given to work-life balance by ensuring, inter alia, the right to disconnect.
- ➔ There is currently a general very positive perception of staff on the impact of teleworking on work-life balance in the new hybrid working modalities.



The extensive teleworking measures since March 2020 to ensure business continuity have raised questions on their impact on workload and work-life balance for EU civil servants.

While the staff surveys carried out by many EU institutions highlight a positive perception of teleworking, some issues have arisen.

Workload seems to have increased for staff across institutions, while work-life balance was ensured for many respondents. This was also due to institutions introducing specific measures such as increased flexibility with working hours, special derogations for more vulnerable staff or their family members, as well as for those with children in home schooling.

Box 17: Insights from the EP on work-life balance measures

The EP introduced a range of measures to support staff work-life balance during the business continuity teleworking, especially for those with more challenging personal circumstances. The measures included:

- *flexibility (in terms of working time and output) for employees with demanding family situations;*
- *the possibility to work part-time outside the place of employment for staff members needing to take care of direct relatives;*
- *allowing carers of children with a disability to work 50% with no corresponding loss of income during the period when the facilities for children with a disability were closed;*
- *a temporary derogation from Staff Regulations to allow vulnerable staff to telework 100% from their country of origin.*

Source: European Parliament, Information on the budgetary and the financial management of the European Parliament in 2020 and replies to the questionnaire in preparation for the EP discharge for 2020.

Teleworking was mostly perceived as positive in terms of work-life balance or, at least, that benefits outweighed the disadvantages. This was mainly due to increased flexibility provided to staff to organise their working time and time saved on commuting.

Some issues were reported, in particular the inability to separate professional and private life when working from home, and the negative impact of less social and professional contact with colleagues.

Box 18: Insights from the ECA on disadvantages of teleworking

Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, the boundaries between private and professional life have become blurred for a large number of staff. Colleagues had different experiences depending not only on their work relations (with managers and co-workers) but also on their personal situation.

The feedback was less positive from respondents who had no regular meetings and no follow-up with their team and the management.

Source: 2020 Discharge - Questionnaire to the European Court of Auditors - Hearing: 8 November 2021.

In general, most surveyed staff expressed the wish to retain the option of teleworking also post-pandemic.

According to the Directorate-General for Personnel of the EP, the shift to extensive teleworking brought a 'New philosophy of staff management focusing on results, trust and care and promoting measures that contribute to a better reconciliation of professional and private life as well as a sustainable and healthy work environment'¹⁰.



The consulted institutions acknowledge the initial surge in workload or perceived workload after the shift to full teleworking and particularly during lockdowns. Some staff tended to work more because of the time saved on commuting or the difficulties in setting boundaries between work and private life. Institutions

realised that a correct application of teleworking, which includes the protection of staff from excessive workload and digital fatigue, is crucial to guarantee work-life balance and satisfaction. To this end, increased attention was given to the right to disconnect and managers were trained to promptly detect and react to issues related to workload.

Box 19: Insights from the EP

There are two sides of teleworking. If teleworking is applied 'correctly', it can be a very important measure to ensure a better balance between work and private life. However, it can also be the opposite. Because if teleworking is not applied correctly, it can end up in a situation where people work continuously and the right to disconnect is not respected, which would not benefit at all the balance between work and private life.

Source: Interview with the HR service of the EP(DG Personnel)

It should be noted that this initial challenge has largely been overcome and staff is generally in favour of continuing teleworking in the current hybrid setting, mentioning how it can contribute to improving work-life balance and to increasing performance and productivity. This was particularly reported by the EC based on the surveys conducted in late 2021 and early 2022.



No substantial budget variations from work-life balance were identified through desk analysis or consultations with EU institutions.

¹⁰ European Parliament, Annual Activity Report 2020, Directorate-General for Personnel.

Team empowerment

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ The adoption of teleworking by all staff in EU institutions had an impact on team empowerment and cohesion.
- ➔ In particular, several institutions mentioned the inability to organise team building activities and away days as having a potential negative influence on staff cohesion in the longer term.
- ➔ The new hybrid modalities do not reduce per se the sense of belonging or the ability to work in teams and co-create, but they could amplify these risks. If a team was already struggling in sharing full engagement, the situation could worsen.
- ➔ This requires new ideas and modus operandi to boost such processes.



The adoption of teleworking by all staff in EU institutions had an impact on team empowerment and cohesion. In particular, several institutions mentioned the inability to organise team building activities and away days as having a potential negative influence on staff cohesion in the longer term.

Box 20: Insights from the EC and team building events

Away days, participatory events and similar team building measures are always work-focused and designed to have a direct and positive effect on staff in the medium and long term. In 2020, due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, fewer away days could be organised.

Source: Source: 2020 Discharge to the Commission - Written Questions to Commissioner Hahn, Hearing of 6 December 2021.

Other institutions, such as the CoR, report a potentially negative effect of extended teleworking on communication with colleagues and co-creation, as well as on team cohesion.

The ECA pointed out challenges for managers in keeping staff motivated during teleworking, also due to the lack of casual discussions and the inability to organise small informal events with staff.



Interviewees and focus group participants confirm how team empowerment and co-creative processes were negatively impacted during full teleworking periods. In some cases, training sessions were organised for managers to address the particular difficulties encountered in leading teams working from home, in particular as regards communication and maintaining team cohesion.

Box 21: Insights from the EC

Teleworking was particularly challenging for managers who had to spread the workload more evenly, re-arrange tasks and responsibilities but also learn how to manage a team remotely, boosting collaboration and paying attention to the well-being of individuals. To keep the team united, managers were encouraged to organise virtual unit meetings, virtual coffees etc. A shift in the mindset to assess performance was needed as well, putting more emphasis on trust and results rather than time inputs.

Source: Interview with DG Human Resources

Hybrid working has reduced the risk of a reduced feeling of team empowerment and cohesion, but it is an issue that still needs to be considered and requires new ideas on how to keep the feeling of belonging (to one's team and institution) and to adapt co-creative processes to the new working modalities. In cases of weaker team cohesion, even a hybrid setting can be harmful.

As one of the possible solutions, increasing the frequency of joint trainings and programmes for teams to come and discuss together could be beneficial. Furthermore, managers should be trained for a new form of leadership capable of motivating staff in a hybrid context.

Box 22: Insights from the ECA

The crisis has proven the resilience of the ECA workforce. It has shown us that our institution can function with less command and control. We can have more empowerment, autonomy and responsibility in our teams, while preserving the high quality of our work. However, this also means we will have to face new challenges, such as keeping team spirit alive, increasing social contact and reinforcing internal communication. Shifting focus from presence to results is a fundamental management goal in support of teleworking.

Source: Interview with the Secretary General's office of the ECA



No budget variations from team empowerment were identified through desk analysis or consultations with EU institutions.

7. STAFF HEALTH

The following paragraphs provide an overview of the measures taken by EU institutions in relation to staff health during the pandemic. In particular, three aspects have been investigated:

- Measures to support staff health
- Health protocols
- Other measures related to staff wellbeing.

Measures to support staff health

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ Support for mental health became, together with medical support, a priority in most institutions. This was delivered through tailor-made services, including helplines, support groups, webinars on wellbeing and mindfulness, etc. Information was also provided to staff on coping with teleworking and work-life balance to avoid burnouts.
- ➔ Several institutions hired additional staff to deal with the health crisis, including doctors, nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists.
- ➔ Some institutions (EC, EEAS, ECA) have used 'pulse' surveys to regularly check staff wellbeing during the crisis.
- ➔ For some institutions it was beneficial to already have mental health and wellbeing programmes in place before the pandemic (e.g. EP).
- ➔ There is general agreement among consulted institutions regarding the need for medical and psychological support beyond the pandemic.



After the outbreak of the pandemic, EU institutions have taken measures to support staff health not only directly related to COVID-19, but also to the impact of the health crisis and changed circumstances (teleworking, social distancing, travel restrictions etc.) on staff mental health and wellbeing. The infographic below summarises the main measures.

Figure 3: Support to staff mental health in EU institutions

Measures to support staff health during the pandemic



Psychological support to staff through e.g.:

- Phone counselling and helplines
- Extensive information on mental health (webinars, trainings, videos)
- Workshops on mindfulness and stress release
- Particular attention to vulnerable staff and families



Hiring of new temporary and permanent staff:

- Doctors and nurses
- Psychologists and psychiatrists



Regular pulse surveys to gather information on staff wellbeing, teleworking conditions, return to office etc.



Testing centres on premises

Vaccination centres for staff



Source: authors' elaboration.

Mental health support, in particular, was reported in most of the institutional documents. This was delivered through different services including helplines, special mailboxes, support groups and webinars on wellbeing and mindfulness. Information was also provided on how to cope with teleworking and work-life balance to avoid burnouts.

At the CoR, a staff volunteer group was set up to support staff in need. At the EP, a 'listening ear' guidance was provided to managers to support their staff. Across institutions, specific attention was given to vulnerable staff members and families in need of psychological and social care.

Box 23: Insights from the CJEU on staff support

Particular attention was given to individuals in vulnerable situations, be it persons who tested positive for COVID-19 and their contacts, vulnerable persons, persons with disabilities or in distress, those supporting others in difficulty or having to care for children staying at home, pensioners and trainees. Each person received appropriate support, having due regard to their welfare and in a way that is respectful of the protection of personal data, with the assistance, where needed, of the Institution's Medical Officers, nurses, the psychologist and the social assistant.

Source: European Court of Justice, Annual Activity Report 2020.

Concerning the strengthening of human resources in medical services, several institutions hired additional staff, including doctors, nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists.

Furthermore, some institutions (EC, EEAS, ECA) have used 'pulse' surveys as a tool to regularly check staff wellbeing during the crisis.

Finally, several institutions introduced testing facilities and vaccination centres on their premises. In particular, a test centre (EcoCare) was installed in the EP to provide COVID-19 PCR testing for staff and to Members of the EP. A vaccination centre was opened on-site. The EC also opened a COVID-19 vaccination centre for staff that is now also used for flu vaccinations.



According to the interviews, for some institutions it was beneficial to already have mental health and wellbeing programmes in place before the pandemic, as in the case of the EP. They had also already established a network of mental health first aiders, which includes members from all DGs. The network was further developed after the pandemic outbreak.

As a consequence of the pandemic, the EC adopted a new policy for mental health, the Fit@home online platform, which is now being replaced by the BE WELL long-term health and wellbeing action plan. One of the main elements is the establishment of a Team for mental health, with specialists available to address the needs of staff in this area.

There is general agreement among consulted institutions regarding the need for medical and psychological support beyond the pandemic.



No substantial budget variations are expected, as existing resources should cover the costs of increased medical and psychological support for staff.

Health protocols

KEY FINDINGS

➔ The key measures introduced by the new COVID-19 protocols in 2020 are:

- Temperature screening at entrances;
- Compulsory mask wearing;
- Social distancing (minimum 1.5 metres);
- Compliance with hand hygiene (installation of hand sanitisers in buildings);
- Enhanced cleaning (e.g. disinfection of common areas);
- Protection screens;
- Modification of ventilation and air-conditioning systems where needed; and
- Awareness raising (e.g. signs, e-mails).

➔ The establishment of a fully digital tracing system for EC staff, which is still in use, should be mentioned. This has proven a great example of how IT can serve as a tool to support the needs of individuals.



After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, specific and coherent health protocols to prevent and contain the spread of the virus were put in place by all institutions. As outlined by the EC Directorate-General for Human Resources, '[...]. These protocols were regularly updated to reflect the evolution of scientific evidence and the guidance provided by national and European public health authorities.'¹¹

¹¹ European Commission, Annual Activity Report 2020 of the Directorate-General for Human Resources.

The key measures introduced were:

- Temperature screening at entrances;
- Compulsory mask wearing;
- Social distancing (minimum 1.5 metres);
- Compliance with hand hygiene (installation of hand sanitisers in buildings);
- Enhanced cleaning (e.g. disinfection of common areas);
- Protection screens;
- Modification of ventilation and air-conditioning systems where needed; and
- Awareness raising (e.g. display of signs e-mails).

In the EC, a COVID-19 task force was set up to draw up rules and guidelines as well as to monitor COVID-19 cases among staff. Similarly, 'Track-and-trace' teams were created in the EP to monitor cases and manage contact tracing.



The EC interviewees mentioned the establishment of a fully digital tracing system for EC staff, which is still in use. This has proven a great example of how IT can serve as a tool to support individuals. The aim is to apply this approach to IT to a much wider range of services in the future (i.e. IT at the service of human needs)

Box 24: Good practice from the EC



When someone tests positive, they self-report it in the system which is connected to the medical service. They also declare who they were in contact with and provide additional health information. The medical service then decides which cases need follow-up attention.

Source: Interview with DG Human Resources



Increased budgetary costs were incurred in 2020 to purchase personal protection equipment, including face masks and hydro-alcoholic gel, COVID-19 molecular analysis tests (PCR), antigen and serological sample tests, health-related services, as well as goods such as thermic cameras, disinfection wipes, etc. (see section 5.1 'Goods and services purchased'). Moreover, the EC covered the additional cost of setting up the vaccination centre, which was then shared with other institutions.

Additional budget for health-related material and services is unlikely in the coming years.

8. IMPACTS ON BUDGET

KEY FINDINGS

- ➔ COVID-19 impacted the absorption capacity of EU Institutions. The 2020 ratio of execution was lower than in 2019.
- ➔ The main category of costs avoided due to the pandemic related to travel, meeting organisation and building maintenance, especially heating.
- ➔ The pandemic led to some additional costs, mainly for IT investment and medical equipment.
- ➔ All in all, the long-term budgetary impact of the pandemic will be more on allocation rather than amount, considering that savings will be partially compensated by new costs especially in terms of digital assets. More significantly, expenditures will be steered by the new working modalities and priorities, e.g. from traditional to online meetings, from physical to digital working modalities, etc.

This chapter illustrated the budget implication of the COVID-19 budget and it is based on the data reported in the EU institution Discharge Questionnaires and on the Reports on Budgetary and Financial Management. The chapter is structured around three sections:

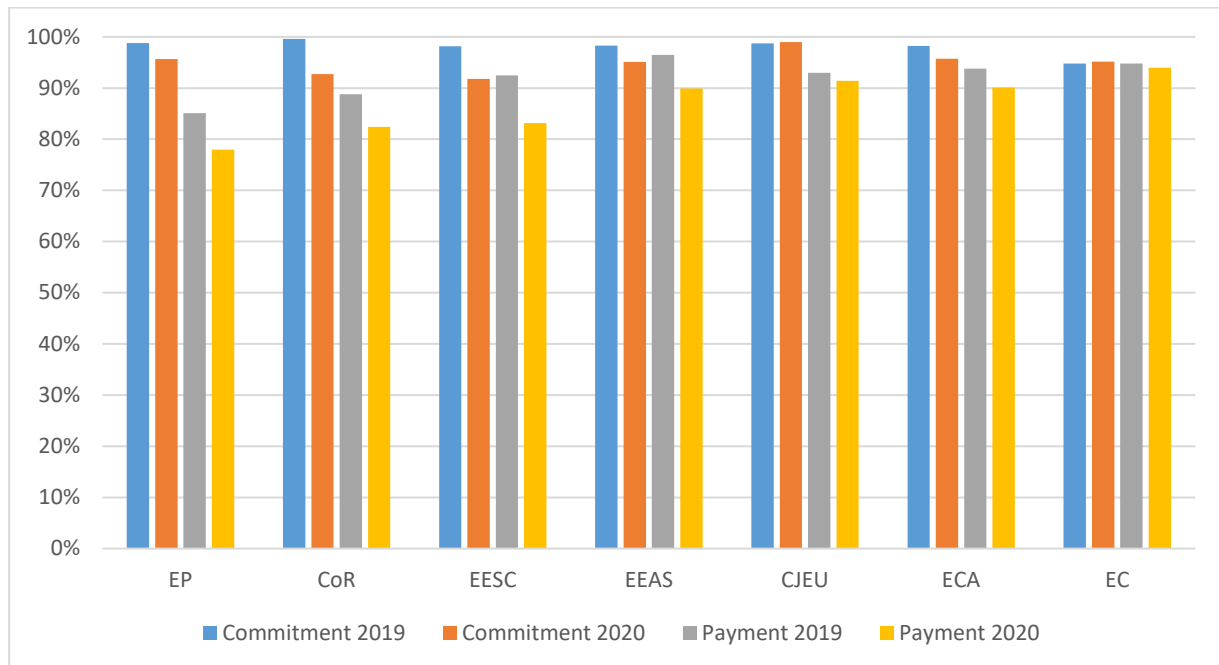
- Overall budget variation
- Savings
- Additional costs

Overall budget variation



In 2020, institutions were not able to absorb all the planned budget. More precisely, the budgetary execution, i.e., commitments and payments on appropriations, did not reach 100% as in previous years.

For all the EU institutions, the suspensions of activities entailing physical proximity or/and travelling, (i.e., training, meetings, missions abroad) resulted in lower costs, i.e., savings. The chart below illustrates the relation between the pandemic and savings comparing commitments in 2020 and 2019. All the institutions suffered from a decrease in the budget execution between the 2019 and 2020. The only exception was savings from travel and organising of large meetings (see next section). This decrease was minor for the CJEU, which in comparison to other EU institutions, organises fewer large meetings (e.g. plenary sessions of EP, CoR, EESC) and its staff does not travel for missions that often (unlike audits of the EC and ECA).

Figure 4: Budget commitments and payments by EU institution, 2019 and 2020¹²

Source: author's own elaboration on financial data coming from Report on budgetary and financial management of the EU Institutions 2019-2020.

Box 25: Insights from the EC on budget variation

As a consequence of the pandemic, the actual budget amounts spent on missions, conferences and meetings as well as training in 2020 were considerably lower than the amounts included in the 2020 budget. This led to savings of about EUR 67 million in total across all DGs, of which nearly half relating to mission expenditure.

Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Human Resources, Annual Activity Report 2020.

The next two sections analyse in more depth where the savings happened and examine the additional costs of facing the COVID-19 emergency.

Savings

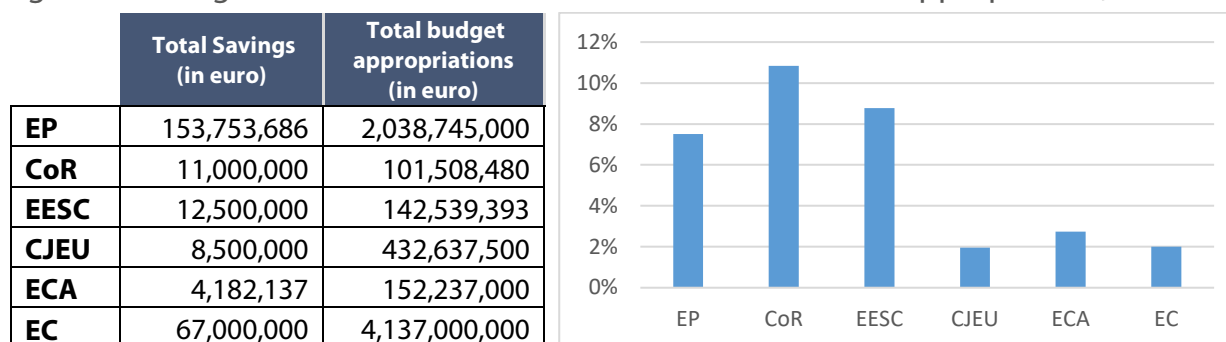


COVID-19 limited or made impossible several activities in the EU Institutions in 2020. The table below reports the savings for each institution (on the left), while the chart on the right shows the ratio between savings and total appropriations (i.e. assigned budget)¹³.

¹² For the EC, data is only referred to MFF heading 5: administration.

¹³ The analysis of the savings and costs do not take into account the European External Action Service. This is due for the complexity of the specific complexity of the budget and for the fact that the EEAS did not provide specific information on these issues. Indeed the EASS states that 'As an initial remark, any estimation of the amounts of additional costs and savings caused by the pandemic would by necessity be both uncertain and arbitrary. It can be assumed that the lower budgetary activity level and resulting surpluses in 2020 is related to the pandemic, but it is not possible to say how much is caused by the normal variation and how much by the pandemic.'

Figure 5: Saving of EU institutions – amounts and ratio to total appropriation, 2020



Source: authors' own elaboration based on the data provided in the Reports on budgetary and financial management (2020) and the Discharge Questionnaires to the European Parliaments (2020) of the EU Institutions

The EP, CoR and EESC saw (proportionally) more savings. As mentioned above, the higher savings are due to greater exposure to the restrictions and the related impact on mobility. Indeed, the limitations on travelling resulted in a reduction of plenary sessions and meetings (consequently less costs for translations, travel reimbursements, allowances and conference organisation).

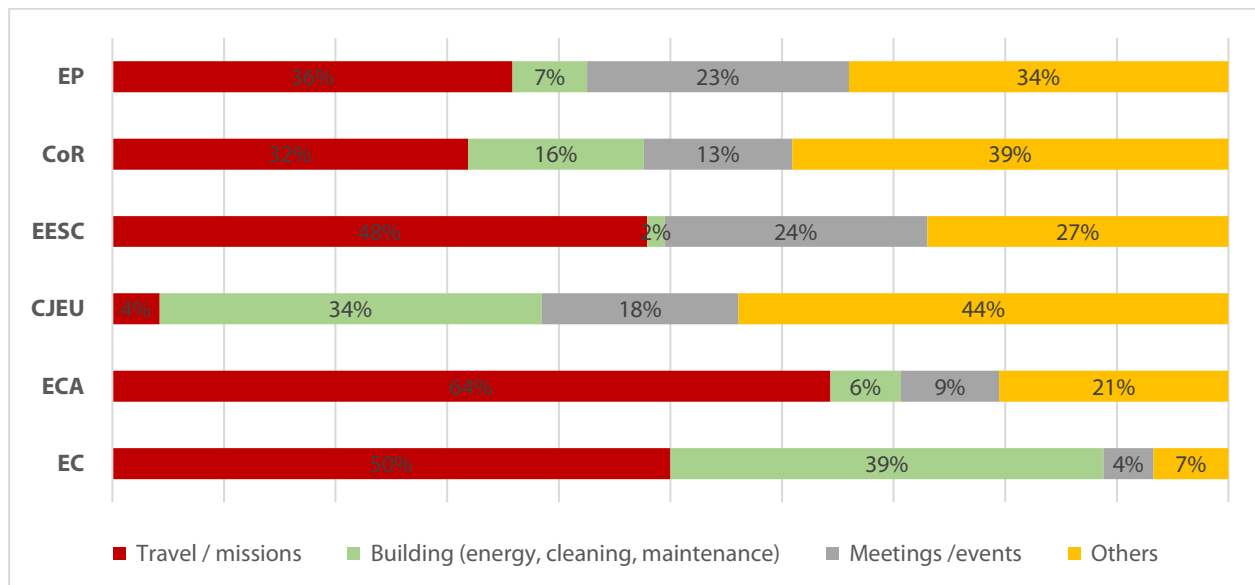
Box 26: Insights from the EESC on savings

In 2020, the COVID-19 health crisis and the resulting travel restrictions worldwide severely impacted the organisation of EESC activities. From mid-March 2020 onwards, many events did not take place or were postponed until 2021. The events that did take place were organised in a fully virtual or hybrid mode and external participants were not granted access to the EESC's premises. As a result, services provided by catering companies, transport companies and external participants were not required, or were only needed to support virtual or hybrid meetings. For these reasons, there were hardly any reimbursements to cover external participants' travel costs nor any catering costs, resulting in the exceptionally low consumption.

Source: 2020 Discharge Questionnaire to the European Economic and Social Committee Hearing: 8 November 2021

In general, savings resulting from less travels seem to be relevant for all the EU Institutions except the CJEU (see Figure 6 below). These are followed by costs related to meeting organisation and building maintenance.

Figure 6: Category of savings of EU institutions



Source: authors' own elaboration

In relation to the savings for meeting organisation, the most important items contributing to the cost decrease are interpretation (including free-lancers). This has been often replaced with remote simultaneous interpreting tools.

Box 27: Insights from the EESC on savings

New IT tools were made available or improved to facilitate remote communication, and a huge effort was put into the organisation of remote meetings (Skype for Business, Webex, Interactio, etc.). 2020 saw the first plenary sessions organised on EESC premises in hybrid mode, starting i.e. with a high number of participants connecting remotely. Distance voting was made available only a few weeks after lockdown, and a system was rapidly put in place to allow remote simultaneous interpreting. This allowed the EESC to continue to perform its institutional role from the very start of the crisis. Indeed, throughout the health crisis, the EESC remained extremely active, holding 562 remote meetings between mid-March and the end of December: 326 with interpreting (using Interactio, a new tool offering simultaneous interpretation or Webex, with consecutive interpretation), as well as 236 meetings without interpretation.

Source: 2020 Discharge Questionnaire to the European Economic and Social Committee Hearing: 8 November 2021

Another important source of savings came from the building management, particularly from energy consumption.

Box 28: Insights from the ECA on savings

(...) we seized the opportunity of the crisis to reduce our energy consumption. Lighting in corridors and offices, ventilation and air conditioning systems were switched to 'weekend' mode. Electricity and water consumption also fell considerably, by 30% and 93%, respectively. Moreover, as almost all of our staff members were working remotely from home, the average number of pages printed per staff was close to zero from April onwards. This allowed for savings on budget lines related to buildings.

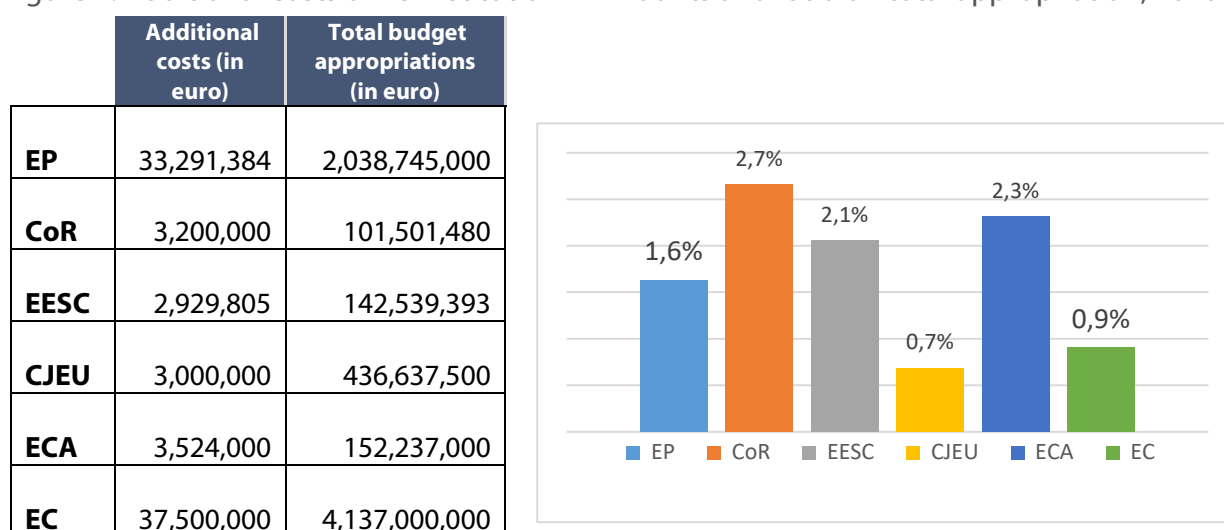
Source: 2020 Discharge - Questionnaire to the European Court of Auditors - Hearing: 8 November 2021.

Additional costs



In parallel with savings, the pandemic generated additional costs. The table below shows these costs (on the left), while the chart on the right shows the ratio between costs and total appropriations (i.e. assigned budget)¹⁴.

Figure 7: Additional costs of EU institution – Amounts and ratio on total appropriation, 2020



Source: authors' own elaboration based on the data provided in the Reports on budgetary and financial management (2020) and the Discharge Questionnaires to the European Parliaments (2020) of the EU Institutions

The additional costs in relation to the total budget (i.e., total appropriations) vary from 0.9% (EC) to 2.7% for the CoR. This partially mirrors the trend for savings, where CoR and EESC ranked first and second for savings and, equally, for additional costs. Similarly, the EC and CJEU have minor costs and savings. The main reason is that, having (proportionally) more savings led to additional resources that could be invested in other areas through budget transfers.

Box 29: Insights from the ECA on additional costs

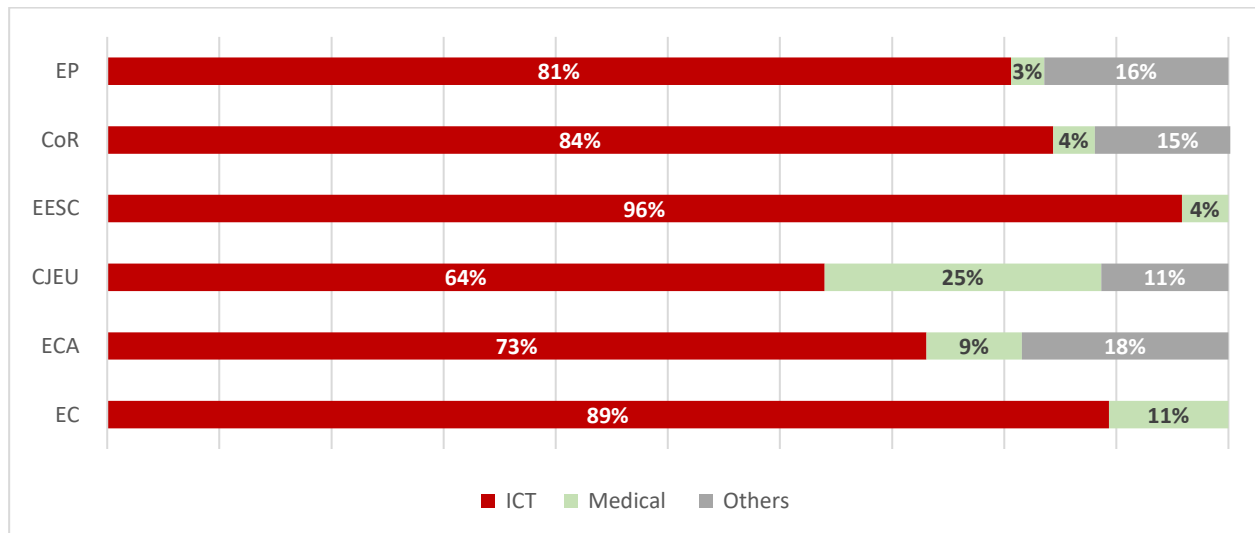
(...) thanks to continuous monitoring of budget execution throughout the year, we were able to identify any budgetary needs and expected surplus at year-end for specific budget lines, thus being able to reorient funds based on priorities in a flexible way. During the year 2020, we made 22 budgetary transfers totalling EUR 4,051,000.

Source: 2020 Discharge - Questionnaire to the European Court of Auditors - Hearing: 8 November 2021.

The chart below provides further insights into the main categories of costs for the EU Institutions due to COVID-19. It seems the largest share of costs related to ICT followed by medical and other costs.

¹⁴ Similarly to the previous section on saving, EEAS financial data are not present in the table, note 8.

Figure 8: Category of additional costs of EU institutions



Source: authors' own elaboration based on the data provided in the Reports on budgetary and financial management (2020) and the Discharge Questionnaires to the European Parliaments (2020) of the EU Institutions

IT as the largest additional cost does not come as a surprise. Indeed, efforts of the institutions to shift everything to digital did not imply just providing personal equipment to staff (laptops, software, etc.) and videoconferencing services, but also the progressive digitalisation of workflows.

Box 30: Insights from the EC on additional costs

Expenditure (were) for information and communication technology equipment and services and decentralised IT systems in relation with the COVID-19 crisis. This concerns in particular new structural needs related to the remote working pattern (upgrade of bandwidth, new collaboration processes, paperless environment, additional security features) as well as a decentralised IT system (about EUR 31,5 million in total).

Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Human Resources, Annual Activity Report 2020.

More important, COVID-19 was a driver for digitalisation pushing the EU Institutions to explore new ways of working and open up their dialogue with the wider public, i.e. European citizens.

Box 31: Insights from the EP on additional costs

Parliament was able to draw upon existing contingency plans to further build on digitalisation, allowing for the smooth introduction of large teleworking regimes, remote voting and online debating and participation tools. Technology has also opened new channels of communication with the citizens. This has brought the Institution closer to them in a time of great uncertainty.

Source: Information on the Budgetary and the Financial Management of The European Parliament In 2020 and Replies to the questionnaire in preparation for the EP discharge for 2020.

Medical costs had an important share. The European Institutions mainly procured:

- masks, FFP2, FFP3, gowns, gloves, glasses, boots, screens,
- hand alcohol rub/ gel,
- provisions for (standard flu) vaccinations,
- medical equipment,
- COVID-19 tests,
- medical disinfection.

'Other' costs in general, are related to additional investments to make the building safer. This includes more intense and frequent cleaning, Plexiglas screens and re-designing of internal flows through restrictions on the use of certain areas and physical distancing measures. In several cases, it also includes new investments in ventilation systems (e.g. EEAS) and new security controls (e.g. CJEU).

Box 32: Insights from the EC on additional costs

'The purpose of the cameras is to measure the temperature of staff and visitors entering Commission buildings, using a thermal sensor. This is done in the context of mitigating the risk of COVID-19 infections. The cameras are running in a stand-alone, self-contained mode for the only purpose of producing an alarm in case of abnormal temperature (temperature above a certain level). No identification is made and no data is collected; more specifically, no images are being recorded or transmitted and the cameras are not connected to any network. The cameras have not been replaced since the limited purpose and deployment do not warrant it.'

Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Human Resources, Annual Activity Report 2020.

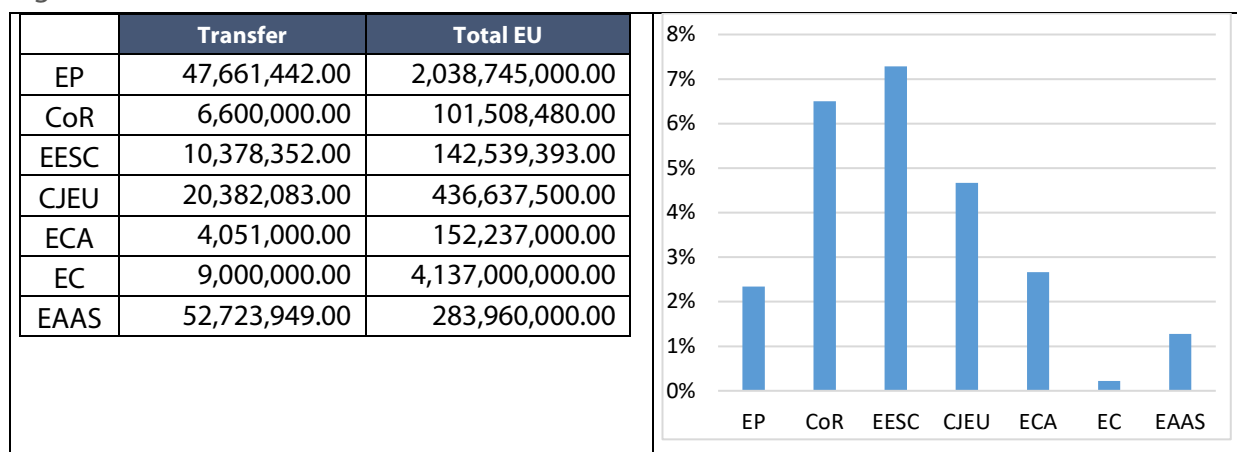
Even if the above figure does not take into account the EEAS, it is worth mentioning specific additional costs incurred by this Institution related to its functions. Along with common additional costs linked to medical equipment and ICT'), reinforced support has been provided to the 143 Delegations in order to ensure the business continuity of financial transactions, budget, missions, procurement, IT, financial circuit, central procurement, etc.).

Transfers



Usually, the EU institutions could re-allocate the left-over i.e., the savings, making it possible to cover additional costs. The table below shows the total transfers per institution.

Figure 9: Transfer of EU institutions in 2020



Source: authors' own elaboration based on the data provided in the Reports on budgetary and financial management (2020) and the Discharge Questionnaires to the European Parliaments (2020) of the EU Institutions

Naturally, the above figures mirror the data reported. As with savings and additional costs, CJEU, CoR and EESC have proportionally most of the transfers. Overall, the prompt use of transfers also allowed the Institutions to use the budget efficiently (see section 8.1).

All the EU institutions mopped up left-over budget coming mainly from less travel and missions, building costs, and event organisation to finance health related expenditure, ICT and building safety.



The on-field analysis confirmed the findings of the desk research. The shared perception was that overall spending was not greatly affected, and new costs were partially covered by savings. In more detail:

- Savings came from the reduction/cancellation of physical meetings, impacting significantly on the use of freelance interpreters, fewer missions, as well as reduced presence in offices and premises.
- The main additional costs were driven by IT needs. More specifically, for more hardware (mainly laptops), software (licences) and services (teleconferencing). Of course, medical equipment was also mentioned (personal protective equipment, disinfection and sanitising measures, vaccination campaign).

An interesting observation emerging from the interviews was about the increase in online training programmes to support the changes in working modalities, especially related to IT skills. The additional costs for those training programmes were compensated by savings from the cancellation of more 'traditional' ones. This path of new costs compensated by the cancellation of 'old' activities and /or by increased efficiency is also envisaged in the future.

Indeed, the on-field analysis led to insights into the trend for 2021. Savings related to less physical events as well as additional costs related to IT continued to be a trend in 2021. However, especially during the focus group, there was a general consensus that the increase in expenditure related to IT will not continue in the coming years. This because the acceleration of IT investment in 2020 and 2021 provided the necessary hardware and software. Indeed, for EU institutions, the pandemic offered the opportunity to accelerate the digitalisation process already started ten years earlier. In some cases, it also filled gaps from underinvestment in the past (see IT sections). For example, the CoR seized the opportunity to re-balance investment in IT equipment.

More in general, the common idea emerging from the focus group was that the pandemic re-steered the budget towards different areas, but this will not necessarily entail an increase in the budget allocated. For instance, training programmes will have the same costs, but there will be more online rather than in-person courses. Physical working places will be maintained, but organised differently with open spaces, hybrid conference rooms and common areas to facilitate exchange and co-creation.

9. CONCLUSIONS

The following paragraphs summarise conclusions on the impact of COVID-19 on EU administration and their response. The first paragraph summarises the key findings from the desk analysis conducted by the authors. The second paragraph sheds light on lessons learnt and reflections for the post-pandemic future as reported by the EU institutions.

Findings from the analysis

The thorough analysis indicates that the EU institutions reacted quickly and adapted to general challenges and those related to their specific role. The table below shows the cross-matching between pandemic related challenges (see chapter 2) and different solutions (see chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7).

Table 8: COVID-19 challenges and EU Institution solutions

Solutions—			Business Continuity Plans and arrangements	Teleworking	Flexible working	Health measures	Inter-institutional cooperation	IT
↓ Challenges ↓								
Common	Short term	Immediate Emergency Measures						
		IT and infrastructure risks						
		Employee risks						
	Medium term	Business and operational risks						
		Communication risks						
Specific EU institutions specific	Site access (e.g. plenary sessions - EP/ COR/ EESC, CJEU hearings, meetings, training (EC)							
	Missions to Member States and outside EU (e.g. audit - ECA/ EC, meetings with stakeholders - EP/COR/ EESC)							

Source: authors' elaboration.

As anticipated, **common and EU specific challenges have been tackled by adopting one or multiple solutions.** For example, 'EU Institution site access' was addressed firstly with extensive teleconferencing which avoided travelling to EU premises. Secondly, EU institutions rearranged their consultation process, among themselves and with external institutions. Challenges in ensuring institutional functioning concerned all the institutions in the short term and required significant adaptation to secure the democratic process.

Box 33: Insights from the EP and the democracy problem

The measures taken to contain the spread of COVID-19, including restrictions imposed by Member States, have represented a major challenge for parliamentary democracy. This concerns in particular efforts to safeguard legislative and budgetary powers as well as political scrutiny.

Source: Information on the budgetary and the financial management of the European Parliament in 2020 and replies to the questionnaire in preparation for the ep discharge for 2020

The common challenge 'Employee risks' was also addressed through multiple solutions. Remote working (teleworking, flexible working) has limited the risk of infections and health measures have supported staff. Enhanced cooperation among institutions enables synergies for the medical teams in different EU Institutions.

Box 34: Insights from the ECA on inter-institutional coordination

The informal network of Business Continuity Managers of the EU institutions and bodies (EU inter-institutional informal BCM Network) was activated on 25 February. Inter-institutional exchanges have gradually been structured, starting on 13 March 2020. The ECA took an active part in the COVID-19 inter-institutional group aimed at exchanging information about the measures put in place by the EU institutions and bodies to tackle the crisis. This group is still active, it meets on a regular basis and the exchanges are very useful for guiding us in our decisions.

Source: 2020 Discharge - Questionnaire to the European Court of Auditors - Hearing: 8 November 2021

Secondly, a crucial role was played by the business continuity plans, helping to address the main challenges especially at the beginning of the pandemic. Most EU institutions already had continuity measures, enabling them to face the business disruptions and maintain basic functions.

Box 35: Insights from the CJEU on crisis management

Pre-existing crisis management structure (Crisis Unit) with rules and procedure allowed for the implementation of a coherent action based on three concomitant and interdependent objectives: protecting health security of the staff and of the persons called upon to be present in the institution's premises, ensuring the continuity of judicial activity and providing support for the staff.

Source: 2020 Discharge Questionnaire to the European Court of Justice Hearing: 8 November 2021

Thirdly, teleworking and flexible working were already in place in the EU institutions, to different degrees. At the beginning of the pandemic they were used mostly to ensure social distancing and avoid the spread of infections. Most of the EU institutions are now looking to move gradually but permanently to hybrid ways of remote and office working, also entailing a revision of building policy as well as considering the work-family balance.

Box 36: Insights from the EC on flexibility

The crisis has accelerated the overall trend towards more flexible ways of working which will be reflected in the upcoming HR strategies.

Source: 2020 Discharge - WRITTEN QUESTIONS TO COMMISSIONER HAHN -Hearing on 6 December 2021

The table shows the key role of ICT as a fundamental emergency tool which will also play a pivotal role in administrative management going forwards. In the early phase of the emergency, ICT enabled the switch to teleworking and videoconferencing, maintaining most institutional functions (see Chapter 3). But the pandemic has highlighted ICT as a major driver of change in EU administration, in particular for the progressive dematerialisation and digitalisation of bureaucratic flows.

Box 37: Insights from the EESC on simplification

The COVID-19 pandemic has also accelerated the EESC's efforts to simplify and modernise its working methods, and the dematerialisation of its financial circuits ('paperless' circuits). Several changes introduced since March 2020 have become structural and will remain for the years to come, for example, e.g. this is the case for commitments and payment of invoices.

Source: 2020 Discharge - Questionnaire to the European Economic and Social Committee - Hearing: 8 November 2021

All in all, EU institutions efficiently addressed the emergency in the short and medium-term. However, changes in working methods and institutional interactions have heavily impacted the *modus operandi* in the long term which poses new challenges such as:

- a) Teleworking affecting the quality and balance of work and private life, making the right to disconnect even more urgent;
- b) Remote working generally helping in terms of workload i.e., not increasing burdens. However, this is uneven among different levels of the organisations. Middle and top management can see their work increase due to the need for more coordination;
- c) The shift to digital work makes cybersecurity central to ensure the safety not only of administrative routine but also the democratic decision-making process (e.g., teleworking and confidentiality of the inter-institutional dialogue);
- d) Digitalisation also means that ICT competence is essential for EU institution employees.

It is also important to note that business contingency plans were essential to tackling the emergency. Taking in account future challenges (e.g., climate, global conflicts) resilience must be core to the culture of EU institutions. In other words, business continuity plans should not be an episodic exercise but a constant effort with continuous revisions.

Lessons learnt and reflections for the future

Looking into the discharge questionnaire answers to specific questions regarding the lessons learnt from the pandemic, as well as the outcomes of interviews and the focus groups discussion, very similar conclusions are drawn by EU institutions.

The most significant change which has impacted and will impact the way of working of EU institutions in the long term is the **shift to extensive teleworking** as of 2020 as well as the acceleration towards **digital administration** (i.e., workflows and procedures). This change brought institutions to draw a number of lessons learnt and reflections.

Teleworking, and increased flexibility in working arrangements in general, have a **positive impact on staff performance** and on work-life balance. In some case, they can also increase productivity.

In the post-pandemic future, **hybrid working** (i.e. a combination of working from an office provided by the employer and teleworking) will be a possible option for staff. At the same time, particular attention should be paid to possible **negative effects** of remote work. In particular, there is a risk of decrease in staff collaboration, co-creation and team cohesion when working remotely for extensive periods. Furthermore, the shift to a hybrid work mode can have a significant **impact on managers**, who will have to adopt new approaches and manage staff remotely.

The pandemic offers the opportunity to develop new working modalities and to empower staff with wider digital skills. In this sense, some institutions have advised towards a deep reflection on quality management and the need to consolidate the **new management and skills** acquired, e.g. through making regular specific trainings for managers including a component relating to staff autonomy and management by objectives.

Across most institutions, the crisis led to a need to revise or rethink business continuity plans. This aspect spurred the need to focus on how to preserve and **enhance the readiness and resilience of institutions** to future disruptions by making BCPs more agile in the future in terms of decision-making processes and by covering more crisis scenarios.

The management of the crisis also triggered an **acceleration of the digitalisation of working and communication methods**, including document workflows and decision-making processes, which will be maintained in the future. This aspect calls for a reflection on future remote collaborative working methods and on how digital tools will reshape the work reality both when working from home and in the office.

The increased use of digital tools can also be a means to provide **more accessibility of institutions to the public**. For instance, the technological developments and experience in relation to virtual presence at the CJEU led to the creation of a project aimed at increasing the CJEU's accessibility to the public by offering a programme of remote visits.

Related to the digitalisation, there is an increase **cybersecurity threats**. This entails not only the need of adapting digital infrastructures but also increasing the administrative capacity. On the one hand, there is a need to hire IT specialists taking in account that these competencies are highly demanded by the market. To face the competition of the private sector, EU institutions shall figure out alternative ways of recruitment encompassing special incentives. On the other hand, cybersecurity asks for a **wider awareness** among the EU staff on the use of IT going beyond the specific technicalities.

Finally, a key lesson learnt relates to staff health and wellbeing. The experience of the pandemic and of home-based work has led to a greater awareness regarding the need to ensure and **increase medical and psychological support** to staff beyond the pandemic. The deep paradigm shift in working modalities brought about by the pandemic entails the need for significant reflections across all EU institutions on potential risks and challenges for the future. Based on the interviews, Delphi analysis and focus group discussions, the key aspects touched can be finally summarised as follows:

- **New managerial mindset, attitude and skills**, e.g. new mindset and skills will be needed when managing teams in a hybrid setting, moving from an assessment of performance based on time inputs towards one that is trust-based and result-oriented.
- **A post-pandemic vision for IT and a new digital culture**, e.g. a new set of principles, rules, behaviours and processes that will support a hybrid environment. In order to make this

environment sustainable (financially and in terms of security), there is an effort to be made to align said principles, rules and behaviours to that objective.

- **New ways of learning**, e.g. attention should be given to new ways of learning and acquiring knowledge in a world where information is constantly available. In this sense, 'hybrid' should be applied also to new training and learning methods.
- **The office as a collaborative workspace**, e.g. the replacement of fixed working stations with flexible, moving ones. How these spaces should be organised is still under debate, but in many cases the objective is to have open collaborative spaces.
- **Attention to mental health and wellbeing**, e.g. the need for medical and psychological support for staff beyond the pandemic.

Recommendations

The table below outlines short- and medium/long-term recommendations drawn by the study team stemming from the research and analysis, divided per research topic.

Research topic	RECOMMENDATIONS	
	Short-term recommendations (2022-2023)	Medium/Long-term recommendations (from 2024)
Business continuity plans	Regardless of the perceived success and effectiveness of BCPs, the experience of fully deploying them during the pandemic is very important to consolidate continuity mechanisms and a crisis management culture. Based on external studies and reports, and/or supported by an independent evaluation, internal reflection in each EU institution should draw lessons and build institutional memory for how BCPs should function.	BCPs need to be more agile, allowing quicker decision-making and covering more crisis scenarios. They should be more deeply embedded in the administrative and management culture of EU institutions. Updating/upgrading BCPs should be through 'continuous improvement' with incremental and breakthrough modifications. BCPs should be regularly updated and upgraded with broad involvement of both hierarchy and administrative personnel to 1) better define responsibilities and chains of command in a crisis, 2) improve internal communication, 3) check redundancy and resilience of administrative routines and IT, and 4) empower internal medical and psychological services.
New working modalities	EU institutions already had some teleworking. However, the pandemic accelerated its broader use and, for some months in 2020, it was the predominant form of work. Now, teleworking and office presence need to be wisely blended in hybrid working. This is not the simple sum of teleworking and office presence; it demands new strategies for managing internal relations without creating inequalities or asymmetrical treatment of people. In the first phase, special attention should be given to changes in mindset, skills and attitudes - especially at managerial level - needed to manage staff in a hybrid environment. Despite differences, sharing experiences among EU institutions can be very important. A common blueprint for heads of unit/managers could capitalise on experiences as well as help disseminate good practices across EU institutions.	Hybrid working should be retained in EU institutions given the benefits of flexibility and effectiveness. However, hybrid working also entails drawbacks including for: 1) institutional belonging and mutual trust, 2) opportunities for co-creation, and 3) informal learning. Innovative tools should be developed to overcome those issues while allowing some experimentation. HR departments of different institutions could share 'best practices' and jointly test new working solutions , with the appropriate involvement of staff and staff representatives. An open inter-institutional forum could be set-up to promote experimentation and collect best practices.

Research topic	RECOMMENDATIONS	
	Short-term recommendations (2022-2023)	Medium/Long-term recommendations (from 2024)
Building and workspace policy	Many EU institutions are re-designing the layout of their premises. The impact on working routines and individual psychology should not be underestimated. Shifting from traditional individual offices to open space entails not only a change in space arrangement but also in working modalities. In addition, there is more video-conferencing. If not harmonised, the combination of the two might have unintended effects, as some people may prefer working from home where it is more comfortable during phone/video calls. A careful assessment of the new layout should better understand such impacts and adopt prompt remedies when needed.	The general satisfaction with inter-institutional cooperation and coordination during the pandemic calls for a reflection on enhanced cooperation beyond the crisis for office space management. Building and workspace policy could offer opportunities to see more synergies and coordination among institutions on this matter, bearing in mind the complexity and specific features and needs of each institution.
Staff recruitment	The pandemic revealed the need for high-skilled staff in EU institutions, especially with new competences and capacities already highly sought after in the market (e.g. cybersecurity). However, EU institutions could find it difficult to attract and keep such talent. Hybrid working modalities can partially make working for EU institutions more attractive. However, a more complex reflection is needed to see if the current competitions and long-term job contracts are the most effective way to attract the necessary competence and expertise.	
IT tools and infrastructure	Attention should continue to be paid to the strategic priority for certain IT investments to keep EU institutions both safe and resilient to crises. Cybersecurity will be key. Investment in IT must guarantee full preparedness in times of crisis.	
Public procurement	In light of the successful implementation of joint procurement procedures during the crisis, the continuation of cooperation in this area should be envisaged, as well as the use of more flexible and simplified procedures where possible and in line with the Financial Regulation.	
Inter-institutional cooperation	The general satisfaction with inter-institutional cooperation and coordination during the pandemic calls for a reflection on enhanced cooperation in different fields such as building policy, HR management, joint public procurement. Indeed, joint efforts to overcome the pandemic crisis enhanced the cooperative attitude among EU institutions. In this perspective, tapping on the empowered cooperation can be a valuable opportunity.	

Research topic	RECOMMENDATIONS	
	Short-term recommendations (2022-2023)	Medium/Long-term recommendations (from 2024)
Staff productivity and satisfaction	<p>A shift in performance evaluation in a hybrid environment is needed. More emphasis should be put on trust-based and result-oriented assessments rather than on 'time inputs'.</p> <p>Particular attention should also be given to designing training using new ways of learning.</p> <p>Attention on work-life balance should keep ensuring the right to disconnect.</p> <p>New ideas and modus operandi should be developed to ensure team cohesion and empowerment in a hybrid work setting. More specifically, managers shall be trained for a new form of leadership capable of motivating staff in a hybrid context.</p>	
Staff health	<p>Continued medical and psychological support to staff should be ensured beyond the pandemic. The new hybrid working modalities entail the need to empower health and social services.</p>	

ANNEX 1 – ANALYSED DOCUMENTS

- 2020 Discharge Questionnaire to the European Court of Justice Hearing: 8 November 2021
- 2020 Discharge, The Committee of the Regions reply to the 2020 discharge questionnaire Hearing: 8 November 2021
- 2020 Discharge - Questionnaire to the European Court of Auditors - Hearing: 8 November 2021
- Answers by the European External Action Service to the written questions of the Committee on Budgetary Control (CONT) of the European Parliament
- 2020 Discharge - Questionnaire to the European Economic and Social Committee - Hearing: 8 November 2021
- 2020 Discharge - WRITTEN QUESTIONS TO COMMISSIONER HAHN -Hearing on 6 December 2021
- Information on the Budgetary and the Financial Management of The European Parliament in 2020 and Replies to the questionnaire in preparation for the Ep discharge for 2020
- Annual Activity Report for 2020 – European Committee of the Regions
- Our activities in 2020, Annual Activity Report of the European Court of Auditors
- Annual Activity Report 2020 – European Economic and Social Committee
- Annual Activity Report for the financial year 2020 – Court of Justice of the European Union
- Annual Activity Report Central Services of the European Parliament
- Annual Activity Report Directorate-General for Personnel of the European Parliament, 2020
- Management Plan 2021, Directorate General Human Resources and Security, European Commission

ANNEX 2 – SUMMARIES OF DESK ANALYSIS¹⁵

Table 9: Staff recruitment modalities per institution

European Parliament	European Commission	Committee of the Regions	European Economic and Social Committee	European External Action Service	European Court of Justice	European Court of Auditors
New selection procedures (Apply4EP) Centralised recruitment No recruitment of Accredited Parliament Assistants between March and June 2020 Paperless transmission of documents		Interviews via videoconference Traineeships suspended in 2020 spring session	Traineeships suspended in 2020 spring session	New guidelines and procedures for HR processes Traineeships postponed to October 2020 session	Remote recruitment No recruitment between March and September 2020 Traineeships cancelled or postponed	Traineeships cancelled 100% digital procedures (interviews, entry into service, delivery of user entitlements)

Source: Discharge Questionnaires to EU institutions, 2020.

¹⁵ Please note: absence of information in any given cell means that no information was found in the consulted sources

Table 10: IT related measures

	European Parliament	European Commission	European Committee of the Regions	European Economic and Social Committee	European External Action Service	European Court of Justice	European Court of Auditors
Individual teleworking equipment	Roll-out of hybrid computers and IT support reinforced Teleworking equipment	95% of staff already equipped for digital workplace	Laptops to all staff, headsets on demand	Laptops to all staff which will gradually replace desktops in offices.	All staff provided with laptops Fully mobile solution with a secure connection	95% of staff with suitable equipment for teleworking	Existing policy 'Laptop for everybody' Remote VPN and access tokens
Digital internal procedures	Shift from paper to digital processes Electronic signature for agreements Strategic project to boost digitalisation			Dematerialisation of working methods (financial circuits, invoice payments) Electronic signature for agreements	Solutions to support digital working environment ICT steering committee		New tools for administrative workflows, communication, recruitment
External functioning	Remote voting Online debating and participation tools Multilingual videoconferencing	Multilingual videoconferencing	New tools for online meetings (Interactio) New voting system (EU survey) COVID-19 exchange platform Multilingual videoconferencing	External communication fully digital Multilingual videoconferencing			Remote auditing using video conferencing and other IT (secure data and document sharing)

Table 11: Means of cooperation among institutions

European Parliament	European Commission	European Committee of the Regions	European Economic and Social Committee	European External Action Service	European Court of Justice	European Court of Auditors
<p>Agreement with the Office of the EU Ombudsman for cooperation on crisis and business continuity management</p> <p>Coordination with business continuity correspondents from other institutions on measures to address the pandemic</p> <p>Inter-institutional Medical Board</p>	<p>Establishment of an inter-institutional group to exchange information and coordinate on COVID-19 within the Preparatory Committee for Questions Related to the Staff Regulations</p>	<p>Cooperation and coordination on business continuity measures, especially with the EESC</p> <p>CoR-EESC: joint PPE purchase, vaccination campaign for staff and telework arrangements</p> <p>Participation in weekly inter-institutional COVID-19 meetings organised by the EC</p>	<p>Cooperation with CoR EESC's technical conference service worked in close cooperation with counterparts at CoR, the EC and the EP</p> <p>EESC, EC, EP and CoR followed the same approach for multilingual videoconferencing</p>	<p>Cooperation with the Commission Office for Infrastructure and Logistics in Brussels (OIB) on measures in headquarters buildings</p> <p>DG Budget and Administration participated in regular inter-institutional meetings organised by the EC</p>	<p>Regular contact with counterparts in other institutions to exchange information IT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -videoconferencing, electronic signature, cloud usage in the Inter-institutional Committee for Digital Transformation -cybersecurity cooperation through CERT_EU 	<p>EU inter-institutional informal network to exchange information</p> <p>Communication channels for crisis management</p> <p>Inter-institutional Medical Board and Advisory Scientific Board Meeting</p>

Source: Discharge Questionnaires to EU institutions, 2020.

Table 12: Productivity and performance changes per institution

European Parliament	European Commission	European Committee of the Regions	European Economic and Social Committee	European External Action Service	European Court of Justice	European Court of Auditors
<p>Great majority of staff evaluated their teleworking experience positively</p>		<p>Overall performance not influenced by teleworking.</p> <p>Main challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cooperation, teamwork, brainstorming • IT problems • workload – to a lesser extent 		<p>Sharp increase in online training courses</p>	<p>For most services, productivity remained comparable to before the pandemic</p> <p>Travel restrictions affected some services</p>	<p>Managers took more effort to manage staff remotely</p> <p>Impact on learning methods (shift to online training)</p>

Table 13: Work-life balance overview

European Parliament	European Commission	European Committee of the Regions	European Economic and Social Committee	European External Action Service	European Court of Justice	European Court of Auditors
New philosophy of staff management focusing on results, trust and care Measures that contribute to a better work-life balance		Sharp decrease in overtime due to increased flexibility Most employees reported good psychological state during teleworking, ability to disconnect from work Not enough work-life separation while teleworking reported by 1/3 of surveyed staff	Satisfying work-life balance Difficulties to reconcile work and home-schooling Staff wish to telework more after the pandemic		Optimistic perception of teleworking Main advantages: - time saved on travel - greater flexibility in organising work time Disadvantages: - less social and professional contact with colleagues, - difficulties in separating professional and private lives	Difficulties in separating professional and private lives Most staff had positive experience of teleworking Negative experience for those without regular team meetings (isolation) 2-hour daily tolerance for childcare important for many staff members

Table 14: Effects on team building per institution

European Parliament	European Commission	European Committee of the Regions	European Economic and Social Committee	European External Action Service	European Court of Justice	European Court of Auditors
	Less away days and participatory events for staff aimed at improving teamwork in the long term	Negative effect of extended telework on team cohesion, communication among colleagues, creativity and co-creation				More challenging for managers to keep staff involved and motivated Lack of discussions and casual chats Inability to organise small events with staff

Table 15: Health related measures per institution

European Parliament	European Commission	European Committee of the Regions	European Economic and Social Committee	European External Action Service	European Court of Justice	European Court of Auditors
<p>Psychological support for staff and focus on vulnerable people (doctor, helpline, listening ear guidance for managers)</p> <p>Installation of a test centre in the EP</p> <p>Six additional posts in the Medical Service + six interim nurses.</p> <p>Preparation of on-site COVID-19 vaccination centre</p>	<p>15 'pulse surveys' between April 2020-January 2021 on 'coping with confinement'</p> <p>Staff corner 'Together at home'</p> <p>Psychosocial support, additional support for most vulnerable</p> <p>Information on mental health</p> <p>Additional psychiatrist hired</p> <p>Flu vaccination extension</p> <p>COVID-19 vaccination centre</p>	<p>Volunteer staff members group to support other staff during lockdown</p> <p>Medical and social service support for health issues during lockdown</p>	<p>Two new part-time doctors, one specialised in infectious diseases</p> <p>Psychosocial support to cope with teleworking and family life</p> <p>Extended teleworking from abroad reduced psychological distress</p>	<p>Staff encouraged to limit length and number of videocalls</p> <p>Special mailbox to address psychological burden on staff</p> <p>Pulse survey of all staff (May 2020) on teleworking, psychological impact, return to office</p> <p>Confidential, peer-to-peer helpline</p>	<p>Informative video by psychologists on how to cope with teleworking and work-life balance</p> <p>Particular attention to vulnerable staff</p> <p>Webinar on time management at home to avoid burnout</p> <p>Telephone counselling</p> <p>Task force to examine measures to protect staff not able to telework</p>	<p>Medical service as counsellor in the Crisis Management Committee</p> <p>Extended psychological support (also from psychologist of own choice)</p> <p>Workshop on practical mindfulness for stress reduction</p> <p>New well-being team</p> <p>Surveys to check staff wellbeing during crisis.</p> <p>Three new confidential counsellors appointed</p>

Source: Discharge Questionnaires to EU institutions, 2020.

Table 16: Health protocols per institution

European Parliament	European Commission	European Committee of the Regions	European Economic and Social Committee	European External Action Service	European Court of Justice	European Court of Auditors
Social distancing Modification of ventilation systems Obligatory community mask wearing Mandatory checks of body temperature at all EP entrances Wearing gloves and masks for cleaning staff at all times Reinforced sanitizing and cleaning protocols. Track-and-trace teams for case and contact tracing management	COVID-19 Task Force: monitoring of COVID cases in EC, rules, guidelines Medical Services responsible for proposing health and safety protocols reflecting scientific evidence and national/EU guidance by health authorities	Obligatory mask wearing Minimum physical distance of 1.5 m Compliance with basic hygiene measures		Social distancing inside buildings Hand hygiene (sanitiser throughout building) Enhanced cleaning (e.g. disinfection of common areas) Modification of ventilation and AC	Temperature screening Mask wearing in communal areas, social distancing Disinfection of areas where people have been present Installation of hand sanitiser dispensers, protection screens, signs Awareness-raising	Restrictions on the use of certain areas, physical distancing measures (signs) Installation of hydro-alcoholic gel dispensers, protective screens, awareness raising Strengthened cleaning

Table 17: Other measures per institution

European Parliament	European Commission	European Committee of the Regions	European Economic and Social Committee	European External Action Service	European Court of Justice	European Court of Auditors
Training to middle management to deal with remote working, staff wellbeing and right to disconnect, side effects of extensive teleworking	Training to confidential counsellors to adapt to online working Information on 'right to disconnect' Courses on digital detox Attention to ergonomics (home office equipment, guidance on desk and chair ergonomics)	New HR weekly newsletter on health situation, remote working methods Guidance for managers to keep contact with staff	New formats to deal with mental health, e.g. the 'Bureaux Volants', where important topics were presented in a live video format, Q&A	Dedicated COVID-19 intranet page Right to disconnect measures (e.g. do-not-disturb rules for managers, limited notifications)	Trainings and information to managers on managing staff remotely and right to disconnect	Antiharassment guidelines specific to the pandemic

Source: Discharge Questionnaires to EU institutions, 2020

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CASE STUDY – COURT OF JUSTICE OF THE EU

Key challenges posed by the pandemic

Lockdown and remote work established at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in order to reduce the spread of the virus prevented the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) from remaining “permanently in session”. Since it was impossible to hold hearings, a large number of cases were pending (1,497 pending cases in 2020). Nevertheless, despite the pandemic, the General Court managed to organise 227 hearings in 2020, only 28 less than in 2019 (255).

Moreover, the IT services of the CJEU were heavily challenged due to the shift to remote work. They had to ensure the stability of the connection for all the staff, and monitor cyberattacks against remote infrastructure. Since everyone started working from home, the security perimeter considerably increased, and remote support became more challenging.

Box 38: Insights from the interview with the IT service

On top of ensuring stable and operational services to users, a challenge was also to ensure that the work programme of the Information Technologies Directorate (DTI) could continue to be carried out according to plan, notwithstanding the difficulties related to teleworking.

Source: Interview with the IT service, CJEU

Internal working arrangements

Business continuity plan

The CJEU already had a Business Continuity Plan set up for crisis situations which had previously been tested through simulation exercises. The crisis management structure is based on the Crisis Unit, which is responsible for adopting, at the level of the institution, decisions relating to the crisis situation and its development. The plan provides for decisions to be taken using a written procedure, and for questions to be addressed to the parties in writing. It also includes specific ways of holding hearings for the delivery of judgments and the reading of Opinions, and simplified conditions for opening an e-Curia account. Moreover, the plan already contained an explicit reference to pandemics (the avian flu had been envisaged) and described the actions to be carried out in such an event.

In February 2020, the plan was activated, and the Crisis Management Centre (CMC) started to implement measures. From the end of February 2020, the CMC and the Crisis Cell started to meet daily. In addition, between March and April 2020, several task forces were set up to deal with the pandemic. A health protection unit including the institution’s medical service was designed to ensure staff safety. Videoconferences were organised in order to tackle the issue of remote participation in meetings, deliberations and hearings. In addition, a dedicated webpage called ‘CJUE-InfoAlert’ was also created to inform staff.

Box 39: Insights from the interview with the DG service

The CJEU considers that, when the COVID-19 crisis materialised, the institution's level of preparedness was optimal:

- *Governing bodies to deal with a crisis (including a pandemic) were in place and fully operational, and critical staff knew their roles;*
- *Procedures for ensuring the continuity of the institution's judicial mission as well as those relating to the continuity of critical administrative activities were up to date; in particular, the essential elements of the BCPs of all CJEU services were well known and identified, such as the composition and contact details of the critical staff or the core business-related tasks to be carried out;*
- *The level of IT equipment was relatively adequate to implement the BCP and to ensure the continuity of the CJEU's mission;*
- *Teleworking schemes were in place;*
- *Rules of procedures of the two jurisdictions were flexible enough to enable the activation of the existing provisions needed to carry on the CJEU's mission without having to amend them.*

Source: Interview with the DG for Administration, CJEU

IT tools and infrastructure

Prior to the start of the pandemic, the CJEU was already equipped with written procedures, as well as an application that allows the electronic lodging and service of procedural documents, 'e-Curia'.

Box 40: Insights from the interview with the IT service

The e-Curia application, which allows electronically filing and exchanging procedural documents since 2011, has proven to be a major asset in the context of the health crisis: by ensuring the dematerialisation of document flows, it has contributed to the continuity of the activity of the registries of both the Court of Justice and the General Court. The usefulness of this tool during the pandemic is demonstrated, among other things, by the very significant increase in the number of accounts opened by national courts (223 accounts at the end of 2021, compared to 121 accounts at the end of 2020 and 45 accounts at the end of 2019).

Source: Interview with the IT service, CJEU

However, these tools alone were not sufficient to ensure business continuity during the lockdown, and the institution had to provide its staff with remote material. In February 2020, 70% of the staff of the Services and of the Registries, and 90% of the staff of the Members' chambers had been provided with remote access equipment. At the end of March, 71% of CJEU staff was fully equipped to work remotely. Then, by the end of May, nearly 95% of CJEU staff had suitable technical equipment for teleworking. Due to this massive shift to remote working solutions, the CJEU internet frequency increased from 1 GB/s to 10 GB/s.

Moreover, in order to facilitate remote work, additional videoconferencing tools were developed, both for the judges' deliberations (in April 2020) and for judicial hearings (in May 2020). Solutions were found to allow the representatives of the parties to intervene remotely, with simultaneous interpretation. With regard to these initiatives, the European Ombudsman awarded a prize for good administration for excellence in innovation in June 2021.

Solutions found to facilitate remote work during the pandemic which proved to be efficient continue to be part of the working methods of the CJEU today. The new paperless workflows developed at the beginning of the crisis are now still used for the everyday work of the CJEU, like specific tools such as the ARES (acronym for Advanced Records System) document management system and the EU Sign Qualified Electronic Signature system.

Overall, even though the IT helpdesk's level of solicitation highly increased (50% increase in requests in March 2020 compared to the 2019 monthly average), the services provided proved to be efficient and largely appreciated by the staff.

Teleworking

The CJEU already had a teleworking regime in place since 2010 for certain categories of staff, long before the crisis began. In addition, a circumstantial teleworking scheme was set up in 2019. After 16 March 2020, a teleworking regime was implemented for the whole staff, apart from essential functions. From 25 May 2020, some staff started to come back to the office as hearings resumed. For parties "entirely unable to travel to Luxembourg", there was the possibility to attend a hearing by videoconference. From September 2020, the teleworking ceiling was set at 50% for staff of the courts and 35% for staff in administrative services. The working regime in place is flexible and based on the time spent in the building.

New rules regarding working hours are currently being drawn up. Since telework heavily affects team building, these new remote working rules will require staff to come to the office at least three days per week, leaving the possibility of working from home for up to two days a week.

Staff management and recruitment

When the crisis started, no recruitments were cancelled (only a few were postponed). A virtual recruitment procedure was implemented, and candidates were interviewed through videocalls. Newly recruited staff could work in their country of origin while waiting for health measures to be eased. Selected staff then had to carry out a medical check-up both in their country of origin and when arriving in Luxembourg.

Box 41: Insights from the interview with the DG for Administration

Electronic invoicing was already in place in March 2020, but not electronic signature, to support amongst others the decision-making on recruitment. The HR directorate nevertheless switched to paperless workflows to adapt to the new working conditions, first through a validation system by email then, from March 2021 on, via Ares, a system that allows for an electronic signature.

Source: Interview with the DG for Administration, CJEU

Inter-institutional cooperation

At the beginning of the crisis, the Preparatory Committee met every day to deal with statutory questions (Comité préparatoire des questions statutaires – CPQS). In addition, the CJEU's Secretary-General is part of a committee called CALux (collège des Chefs d'Administrations des institutions et organes de l'UE), which meets regularly in Luxembourg to discuss the situation, share information, and coordinate the respective strategies. More precisely, it allowed the adjustment of sanitary measures (especially the vaccination campaign) between the member states level and the internal level of the institutions. Moreover, CJEU medical officer regularly met with his colleagues from the other EU institutions through the Inter-institutional medical board, in order to provide medical advice to the decision makers. The CJEU also cooperated with other institutions at the IT level, especially regarding cybersecurity through CERT_EU (The Computer Emergency Response Team for the EU Institutions, bodies and agencies).

Effect on the staff

Staff satisfaction (work-life balance)

Teleworking is rather well perceived by the CJEU's staff. Even though it allows less social contact with colleagues and makes it harder to separate professional and private lives, remote work allows to save time on travel and offers a greater flexibility in the organisation of working time.

A survey conducted within the CJEU outlines that in 2020, working from home was perceived rather optimistically, while in 2021 it was perceived more optimistically and much less pessimistically. According to this survey, a majority of staff (66 %) find that teleworking helps to achieve a better work-life balance. In addition, the majority of respondents are willing to keep this flexibility in the future, provided however a simplification of workflows and processes. However, the need to maintain social and professional contacts remains essential, especially for newly hired staff. In the same manner, the right to disconnect is fundamental to have a healthy work-life balance.

Staff health

Several initiatives were launched to help CJEU's staff coping with the teleworking regime, such as informative videos by psychologists on how to cope with teleworking and work-life balance, webinars on time management at home to avoid burnout, telephone counselling. In addition, the Court's psychologists' workload doubled, and a task force was set up to manage staff whose work could not be carried out remotely.

Regarding the health protocol, social distancing measures were imposed and wearing a mask in communal areas became mandatory. Hand sanitizer dispensers and protective screens were installed, and cleaning operations were strengthened. Moreover, various awareness-raising communications provided CJEU staff with information and updates.

Productivity and performance

Overall, the CJEU was quite well prepared to face the consequences of the pandemic and the new working regime had a rather positive impact. Staff and management adapted quickly to remote working, and morale and productivity remained high. After the shift to telework, levels of productivity remained stable compared to how it was before the start of the pandemic for most services of the CJEU. Some services were nevertheless affected by travel restrictions due to the nature of their work. Generally speaking, staff became more autonomous and felt better concentrated, and digitalization allowed efficiency gains. However, technical and logistical conditions at home were less adapted than in the CJEU offices, and it became harder for staff to reach and consult colleagues.

Managers were provided with trainings and information on how to manage staff remotely, ensure a more balanced distribution of workload and prevent burnout (in particular, as regards communication and maintaining team cohesion). As for the staff, they will be offered with training on how to develop skills relevant to hybrid work. Moreover, a compulsory online training course on cybersecurity threats is being followed by all staff members.

Box 42: Good practice

Unprecedented level of mutual assistance within CJEU's services and among services: staff in charge of reimbursing mission expenses devoted time – since missions had first been discontinued and then reduced due to the pandemic – to support colleagues in other HR services, where the workload on the contrary increased because of the sanitary crisis; likewise, staff in charge of visits temporarily supported staff in other CJEU's services. While this ad hoc reallocation of resources helped to optimise the distribution of the workload during the crisis, it also fostered the creation of new synergies, which the Court continues to capitalise on today thanks to the structural adjustments they have brought about.

Source: Interview with the DG for Administration, CJEU

Long-term impact

Budgetary consequences

The pandemic had a significant impact on the CJEU's budget. The shift to remote work implied the purchase of IT equipment (EUR 1.8 million in 2020 and EUR 900,000 in 2021), and the sanitary restrictions imposed the purchase of disinfection and personal protective equipment (EUR 700,000 in 2020 and EUR 100,000 in 2021). Moreover, with employees going back to the office when lockdowns were over, the increase of air changes frequency had an impact on heating expenses (EUR 300,000 in 2021). Furthermore, savings made thanks to the cancellation of courses allowed to invest in online training courses.

Further investments are planned to continue with the process of digitalising workflows and procedures. EUR 100,000 will be invested in 2022 to further implement the mobility programme, following the COVID-19 crisis. In 2023, EUR 120 000 will be spent for the streaming of judicial hearings. Moreover, the CJEU will continue to spend on training courses and coaching to develop a new management culture.

The pandemic also allowed savings on several budget areas, such as freelance interpretation, professional training, missions, cleaning and security and surveillance of the buildings, furniture and to protocol-related activities.

Box 43: Insights from the interview with the DG for Administration

- In 2020, EUR 8.5 million were saved, including EUR 2.5 million due to the reduction of the salary adjustment to 0.7%; EUR 600,000 for the reduced use of freelance interpreters and translators; EUR 600,000 and EUR 400,000, respectively, for the reduced number of training courses and missions; EUR 1.9 million for reduced use of security and surveillance services; EUR 300,000 of savings in office supplies and printers; and EUR 300,000 due to the cancellation of a large number of seminars, visits and protocolary events.

In 2021, EUR 6 million were saved, including EUR 1.2 million linked to the reduction of the salary adjustment to 1.9%, down from the 2.6% initially estimated by the Commission; EUR 1.1 million for the reduced use of freelance interpreters; 1.1.M EUR for the reduced number of training courses and missions; EUR 500,000 for reduction in surveillance services; EUR 0.4 million of savings in office supplies and printers; and EUR 100,000 due to the cancellation of seminars, visits and protocolary events.

Source: Interview with the DG for Administration, CJEU

Lessons learnt, future challenges

The CJEU adapted to the crisis and is now more efficient and above all, fully resilient. The business continuity plan have been updated and upgraded with lessons learnt from the pandemic. For instance, it now includes a strain dedicated to resuming on-site work. Moreover, the institution's Internal Emergency Plan (Plan d'urgence interne – PUI) has become a new Emergency and Business Continuity Plan (Plan d'urgence et de continuité – PUC).

Furthermore, the crisis increased the CJEU's awareness on the importance of taking care of staff wellbeing. In addition, the pandemic has undeniably impacted the working methods and has initiated a move towards enhanced autonomy.

Some practices that have been developed during the pandemic will continue to be used, as they proved to be efficient, such as remote participation to hearings which avoids the need to postpone them.

Box 44: Insights from the interview with the DG for Administration

A system of remote and hybrid visits, to complement on-the-spot visits, and the web streaming of hearings are currently entering in a pilot phase and are likely to be introduced as permanent alternatives to on-site presence. This will increase the transparency of the institution and allow it to reach more people (e.g. those who do not have the possibility to travel to Luxembourg) and help citizens understand how the institution works.

Source: Interview with the DG for Administration, CJEU

Nevertheless, the pandemic brought out some new challenges that must be resolved. Difficulties in communicating instructions and in disconnecting, as well as ergonomic risks resulting from the use of unsuitable equipment in the home are some challenges still present that will need to be addressed in the future.

CASE STUDY – EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Key challenges posed by the pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted activities and caused the EC to think differently. Forced teleworking and travel restrictions prevented from carrying out on-the-spot audits regarding shared management policies. Similarly, there were fewer missions and meetings with national and regional authorities.

Teleworking had an impact on the existing teleworking rules. Structural and occasional teleworking schemes were already in place but teleworking was not recognised as a right.

New needs arose consequently, such as the need to improve staff digital literacy and the shift from paper to paperless workflows.

Internal working arrangement

Business continuity plan

Business continuity plans were in place across all DGs already before the pandemic, with lists of critical staff and high-level crisis management responsibilities. The presence of these plans facilitated the decision-making process in a period of unprecedented crisis where responsiveness was key, ensuring smooth continuation of critical activities. However, BCPs had been adjusted up until terrorist attacks and thus need to be updated to be able to better respond to the next crises.

IT tools and infrastructure

Regarding IT infrastructure, the Commission was well prepared, as 95% of the staff was equipped with a laptop and IT teleworking infrastructure was available for 5,000 simultaneous connections, videoconferencing was possible via Skype for business and Webex and the system was based on cloud. Despite these good foundations, it was not adequate to sustain the whole institution working remotely. This required an acceleration and upscaling of IT infrastructure to accommodate collaboration, video conferencing on a large scale, allow remote connection for large numbers etc. In addition, about 3,000 additional laptops were delivered to staff.

This new work setting required a switch from paper-based and manual signature to fully digitalised workflows, including e-signature if needed.

Box 45: Good Practice

A fully digital tracing system was established. When someone tests positive, they have to self-report it in the system which is connected to the medical service. They also must declare who they were in contact with, along with other relevant information and the medical service then decides which cases need follow-up attention. This has proven a great example of how digital can serve as a tool to support individuals. The aim is to apply this approach to IT to a much wider range of services in the future (i.e. IT at the service of human needs).

Source: Interview with DG Human Resources (HR), EC

Teleworking

Structural and occasional teleworking schemes were already in place before the pandemic, although teleworking was not recognised as a right for Commission staff, i.e., the manager could refuse it if not compatible with the interests of the service. However, as of 16 March 2020, all staff except those performing critical functions were requested to telework. Staff with tasks whose work is incompatible

with working from home (e.g. nurseries, close protection officers, drivers), were excluded from mandatory teleworking as well.

From an HR point of view, the existing legal framework for teleworking could be applied immediately and adapted according to the *force majeure* situation, allowing for exceptions for certain staff. Regarding teleworking from outside the place of employment, additional flexibility was granted according to exemptions on an individual basis. The exceptions were based on travel restrictions or on the need to care about a family member. This was only temporary as return to the place of employment was mandatory as soon as travel restrictions lifted.

Flexibility was enhanced also regarding staff with children at home, due to temporary closure of *crèches*, kindergartens and schools, or with children in quarantine. This took the form of an internal arrangement between the employee and the line manager. Staff with a dependent child with disability could also request a special parental leave.

The time registration system did not change, nor did monitoring, but particular attention was paid to staff working many extra hours. The Security Directorate in DG HR regularly monitored staff presence in the office to ensure compliance with ceilings for maximum office presence indicated in the *force majeure*.

Guidelines on teleworking were published to set out the principles and rules common to all Commission departments and applied to officials, temporary agents, contract agents as well as to national experts and bluebook trainees, even if with some alterations. These guidelines have been regularly updated according to health developments.

Starting from April 2021, a gradual return to the office was set out in progressive phases, always prioritising staff health and safety. The plan was in line with measures taken by Member States and following recommendations of the relevant health authorities and of the Commission Medical Service.

Teleworking is now managed differently: there is a minimum number of days for presence in the office, but the overall presence over the week is also at discretion of the manager (whilst having in mind the wellbeing of staff). The system is hourly based, so there is additional flexibility (e.g. a staff member can work from the office in the morning and at home in the afternoon). This increased use of teleworking requires particular attention both to the equipment such as screens and docking stations and to health-related measures such as basic ergonomic rules.

Staff management and recruitment

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact also on recruitment procedures, especially at the beginning of the crisis, even though to a limited extent. This included delays in the final selection of ongoing competitions and difficulties in completing recruitment formalities in the Commission premises for selected candidates.

Thanks to the digitalisation of workflows and to flexibility about pre-recruitment medical check-ups, the recruitment rate was similar to previous years. Interviews were held remotely as soon as the restrictions were put in place and are still being done remotely. All job publications were processed as planned and no delays were experienced.

Inter-institutional cooperation

In March 2020, the Commission established an inter-institutional group within the CPQS (Comité préparatoire pour les questions statutaires) for the exchange of information and coordination among institutions regarding measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. The group was chaired by the

Commission and included representatives from EU institutions and bodies. Throughout 2020, they met 48 times and cooperation proved to be particularly fruitful in sharing information, best practices and aligning measures across institutions. Regular ad-hoc exchanges were organised at service level as well.

Moreover, DG HR ensured regular information and social dialogue with the trade unions, as well as coordination with DG COMM and other EU institutions (in particular the EEAS for staff in delegations).

Effect on the staff

Staff satisfaction (work-life balance)

Forced teleworking had an impact on work-life balance, especially during full lockdowns in 2020. At the beginning, an increase of workload was reported for some services whose task were linked with management of the pandemic. For the future, a response to this would require strategic reallocation of resources, as well as a shift in the way work is organised i.e. more work could be organised via Task Forces.

By working from home, the boundaries between work and private life came down and additional measures were needed to protect staff from digital fatigue and ensuring the right to disconnect.

However, from data collected through surveys carried out in late 2021/beginning of 2022 it emerged that teleworking was efficient and welcomed by staff and, if well regulated, can contribute to a better work-life balance and to increasing performance and productivity. Support provided by colleagues and managers was appreciated and, despite some difficulties, safety was ensured. The majority of staff is in favour of continuing with hybrid working even after the *force majeure* period.

Staff health

Staff health was of paramount importance to the Commission. During the lockdown in 2020, DH HR carried out regular pulse surveys to ask about staff perception and mental health in coping with the pandemic, as well as regarding the new working environment. The feedbacks were taken onboard to shape future strategies and respond to staff needs.

Psychological support was provided in various forms, namely Conferences and workshops, videos about ergonomics rules at home, or about working from home with children, the importance of digital detox, strategies to cope with lockdowns, etc. A Fit@home webpage was created towards the start of the pandemic, providing information and courses on how to preserve wellbeing and contact details of support services in case of need. Additional flexibility was applied regarding part-time and parental leaves. A “Boost your wellbeing” programme was launched to help colleagues and pensioners to fight isolation and mental strain. It included an HR TELECARE phone line where trained volunteers answered the phone, giving general support or advice and the “Buddy Service”, which pairs callers with a buddy to have regular exchanges with, if needed. Another small measure regards colleagues’ availability for running errands for someone else, which were posted in the My IntraComm space.

The Medical Service played a key role in providing psychological support thanks to the remote organisation of meetings and to proactive targeted support to colleagues who may have needed extra attention (regarding loneliness, psychological issues, etc...).

Regarding the fight to the pandemic, to increase cost-efficiency, the vaccination centre was shared with other institutions under the EC umbrella.

Productivity and performance

Teleworking and the shift to the new hybrid working modality required increased digital literacy and new types of managerial skills to handle and manage a team which is mixed, in-office and at home, especially during meetings.

Regarding digital literacy, staff is now more autonomous in using equipment, different video conferencing tools and in setting up a functioning home office. A lot of resources were made available to staff to help them with the transition. Training sessions on Microsoft 365 and Microsoft Teams were provided as well.

For managers, in addition to new guidelines and actions implemented to facilitate the smooth exchange of information to ensure both business continuity and mental wellbeing of individuals, specific training on how to manage staff remotely was provided. Teleworking was particularly challenging for managers who had to spread the workload more evenly, re-arrange tasks and responsibilities but also learn how to manage a team remotely, boosting collaboration and paying attention to the well-being of individuals. Staff and managers were used to working together in the office and the change in the mindset was not straightforward. Regular messages to middle managers were sent from the Director-General of DG HR, complemented by regularly updated guidelines and a Vademecum for managers on how to manage staff remotely, and how to keep them engaged. Moreover, a shift in the mindset to assess performance was needed as well. The situation required more emphasis on trust and results, rather than time inputs.

Increased flexibility is necessary, as it has become clearer than ever before that one single system to fit 40 Directorates-General in the EC with different views and needs is no longer suitable.

Long-term impact

Budgetary consequences

As a consequence of the pandemic, large savings resulted from the cancellation of missions, conferences and meetings and from training to a smaller extent. Further savings were related to freelance interpreters, due to reduced number of meetings, and building costs (decrease of rents thanks to the EC taking advantage of the 'bonanza effect' during the peak of the pandemic with a drop in rent prices). In the future, there could be further savings resulting from the greening policy.

Part of these savings were transferred to reinforce other budget lines which required additional budget, because of the pandemic. These are mostly IT equipment and services, mainly related to the increased needs related to the remote working environment such as upgrading the bandwidth, new collaboration processes, paperless environment, additional security features as well as a decentralised IT system. Additional expenditure will be required for IT to avoid setbacks, but they will be much less than in 2020. Other investments were made in purchasing medical services (mainly vaccination campaign), sanitary measures in children centres and home office equipment to all staff.

Lessons learnt, future challenges

The experience of wide-scale forced teleworking during the Covid-19 pandemic, implemented within a very short period of time, showed that the Commission was able to function effectively and demonstrated that teleworking is an essential tool not only for ensuring business continuity in times of crisis but also as a way to increase productivity and provide for a better work-life balance.

Teleworking, and the current shift to hybrid working, has brought additional changes: for instance, the decreasing use of canteens led to the decision to internalise their management (previously outsourced

to contractors) which, in turn, led to better control over the quality of the service and the food provided, with great attention to sustainability of the food supply (farm-to-fork approach).

Changes in office spaces and buildings were required as well as a result. The focus is now on modernising the institution and on changing and re-arranging office spaces into open collaborative spaces.

Regarding digitalisation of workflows, had it not been for the pandemic, these changes would have taken much longer, also in terms of changes in attitudes and mindset.

As a modern employer, the Commission has adopted two new strategies: the New HR strategy for the Commission and “Greening the Commission”, to achieve corporate climate neutrality by 2030. Both entered into force in April 2022. The new HR strategy promotes a modern, digital and flexible work environment that takes into consideration staff wellbeing, aims to enhance efficiency, and enable work-life balance and a decreased environmental impact. It is founded on the principles of objectives-based and results-oriented management and a culture of trust and entails the abolition of strict core hours as such. On the opposite, staff are requested to be available as in reachable during timeslots, necessary to ensure interaction with colleagues. The strategy also introduces the right to disconnect, with a clear disconnection period to ensure staff wellbeing and work-life balance. Further to this, teleworking is now recognised as a right and it is allowed up to 60% of working time, with greater flexibility about location.

The Fit@home online platform used during the pandemic has been replaced by a long-term Health and wellbeing action plan, called BE WELL at work. One of the main elements is the establishment of a Team for first aid mental health, with specialists available to address the needs of staff in this area.

CASE STUDY – EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Key challenges posed by the pandemic

The pandemic put considerable strain on the European Committee of the Regions' (CoR) business continuity in several ways. The ways of working were disrupted, especially the political activities. The Plenary Sessions of March and May 2020 were cancelled, as well as all statutory meetings. A number of actions and tender procedures were cancelled. During most of the year, missions were cancelled. Despite the efforts, the occasions to involve other EU institutions in activities related to CoR opinions, networks and platforms were significantly reduced and the number of CoR opinions decreased compared to previous years.

Box 46: Insights from the interview with the CoR SG Cabinet

A further challenge was linked to the political nature of the institution itself which represents an additional layer to go through. This was particularly evident during the crisis, when the priorities of the administrative and political side of the institution had to equally be taken into account and converge.

Source: Interview with the CoR SG Cabinet

Nevertheless, the CoR never stopped working despite the challenges faced during the pandemic. Extra efforts were needed to ensure continued support to political activities, always prioritising CoR Members' and staff health.

Internal working arrangements

Business continuity plan

The pandemic took everyone by surprise. At the beginning, the management could rely on a Business Continuity Plan adopted in 2009. However, the scope, impact and duration of the pandemic shed light on the shortcomings of the plan which was not adequate to tackle this type of crisis. This required additional time and resources, but the CoR eventually succeeded in ensuring proper business continuity. In order to enhance the CoR's readiness and to ensure business continuity in future crises, an in-depth revision of the BCP was launched in late 2020 with a more streamlined approach to clearly define responsibilities and the lines of command, taking into account the lessons learnt from handling the pandemic.

IT tools and infrastructure

Regarding IT, it is important to underline that this is a joint service between the CoR and the EESC. According to the interview with the IT service, the directorate was under-resourced when the pandemic arrived after years of structural under investments, unlike other institutions. However, unused appropriations in other areas due to COVID-19 were transferred to reinforce two budget lines related to IT, namely 'equipment and software' and 'IT services'.

The shift to full teleworking was challenging for the IT department which had to ensure that staff and members were equipped with tools and systems to allow the institution to operate fully remotely. The basic idea was to provide each end-user with a laptop. The demand was high in the first weeks, but together with the HR department, a priority scale about who should get a laptop first was established and the delivery was completed by the end of 2020. Another small simple measure was providing everyone with quality headphones.

One main issue was linked to the fact that IT is a support-intensive area and the helpdesk was overloaded with requests. The IT department surprisingly realised that two main activities required on-site presence: managing IT networks and helpdesk support. This was particularly challenging at the height of the crisis due to the impossibility to enter buildings. However, when it was possible, they were the first one to go back to work in presence.

In general, the approach in 2020 was to “survive” and ensure business continuity. This changed in 2021, when the focus shifted on improving IT services, also thanks to the results of a series of studies carried out to understand the needs and future investments that had to be prioritised. The IT preparedness was overall good and safe connection from home could be ensured. Technical changes were introduced to allow safer solutions or to generally improve the performance, given the higher number of people connected (from around 100 per day to 1,200).

The rollout of digital internal procedures was already planned thanks to the Digital Strategy adopted in each of the Committees in 2019, but actions were accelerated by the pandemic. Some platforms for ordinary administration were already there, but they were enhanced or adapted to support paperless workflows or to carry out actions online. For instance, the Members' Portal, to access working documents and related services for members' meetings, was already capable of supporting paperless meetings. Phoenix, a service used to manage members' expenses, was quickly adapted to claim expenses online. Adonis, the tool for managing internal documents workflows, was improved during the crisis to support paperless documents.

Continuous progress was made with e-invoicing and e-procurement, as the latter was previously available for large procedures only. A working group on electronic signatures was established.

Box 47: Insights from interview with the CoR/EESC IT service

The fact there was a digital strategy in place and that it was being implemented meant the CoR-EESC IT service was quite well prepared to accelerate throughout the crisis. They did not start from scratch, very little had to be done in terms of enhancement and specific developments were quickly completed.

Source: Interview with the IT service, CoR/EESC

Regarding videoconferencing and meetings, the CoR needed to upscale existing systems and tools or use new platforms. For the plenary sessions, a platform called Interactio was used which allowed to hold meetings with interpretations. Since June 2021, statutory meetings were held in hybrid mode, through Interactio. Such meetings first required a lot of support and interventions from IT.

Regarding e-voting, an application that facilitated online and in-person voting during hybrid and fully online CoR meetings was developed. In addition, e-voting was used as well for staff Committee elections, further showing the shift to digital in internal workflows.

Teleworking

A teleworking scheme was already in place before the pandemic, but the CoR was not entirely prepared in terms of necessary IT equipment, experience and teleworking culture. As of 16 March 2020, teleworking became mandatory for all staff. Only staff whose tasks required their presence in the buildings for ensuring Business Continuity were allowed to enter the building premises. Teleworking required significant efforts from the IT department to ensure that staff and members were equipped with tools and systems to allow the institution to operate fully remotely.

Flexibility measures ('old' teleworking scheme, Flexitime) were suspended and the standard working time was applied, with massive teleworking applied to all staff whose tasks allowed for. Teleworking from abroad was allowed to single cases, depending on the social and/or medical needs. This was

further extended before Christmas 2020, showing additional flexibility while ensuring compliance with the rule that staff must live in the place of employment. From May 2020, full telework was strongly recommended for all staff. Return to office was possible occasionally, but the majority of staff continued to work from home.

During this period, as a way to ensure the best conditions for staff working from home, a survey was carried out to assess their needs and the best solutions to allow ergonomic conditions at home. A second survey was launched in the beginning of 2021 and results were used to revise the rules about teleworking.

Box 48: Insights from the interview with the CoR SG Cabinet

One of the most difficult parts was convincing all staff that teleworking was the right thing to do. This strong resistance was in part due to the uncertainty about the whole situation, and the duration of these new working conditions, which required a strong leadership to respond.

Source: Interview with the CoR SG Cabinet

Staff management and recruitment

Due to the exceptional situation, the CoR quickly adapted its practices and remote interviews via videoconferencing for all its recruitment procedures. The regime of presence for trainees was in line with the staff regime. Trainees were also provided with CoR laptops in the second half of 2020, as part of the wider delivery of laptops to the Committees' staff.

Inter-institutional cooperation

During 2020, cooperation with the other institutions was strengthened. Given that the CoR and the EESC share buildings and staff, coordination between them was particularly intense and included the joint purchase of medical protective equipment (masks, sanitising gel, etc.), organisation of vaccination campaign and coordination of teleworking, regime of presence and IT equipment. This was formally deepened with the renegotiation of the Cooperation Agreement, signed in October 2021 and entered into force on November 1st, 2021. The new agreement further deepens coordination in several administrative areas and includes services in the Joint Services, with more regular meetings between directors and groups to align measures and enhance joint procurement and budget requests approval.

In addition, cooperation was intensified with other institutions as well, especially with the EC and the EP. Despite restrictions, bilateral cooperation with the EP increased on a set of priority areas which are reviewed and updated every year. Cooperation with the Council was intensified in selected areas too. Regarding coordination to approach the pandemic, the CoR took part in the inter-institutional COVID-19 meetings organised and chaired by the Commission, facilitating the sharing of information, best practices and enhance coordination.

The perception, however, was that institutions were not really taking a coordinated approach, but mainly sharing information. This was evident in the regime for entering buildings, different for each institution. According to the interview with the SG Cabinet, although a common building management for all institutions was not welcomed by everyone, during the emergency it could have facilitated many aspects. The same applied to the acquisition of the same videoconferencing systems at the same time.

Box 49: Insights from the interview with the CoR SG Cabinet

Each institution moved independently and has found its videoconferencing facilities, and somehow, they all reached a similar situation. Having had a more centralised service unit delivering one tool compatible with centrally established parameters to all institutions would have saved time and resources (developers, staff, budget etc.). They did it and succeeded because there was no other choice, but this shows that it could have worked better and more efficiently with a coordinated approach.

Source: Interview with the CoR SG Cabinet

Effect on the staff

Staff satisfaction (work-life balance)

Flexible working arrangements that could contribute to better balance between personal and professional life were already in place but were suspended when compulsory teleworking was introduced. In case of higher-than-average workload, managers had the possibility to add hours to flexitime to balance hours out. To ensure work-life balance, a proposal for a new emailing policy was drafted in 2020 and introduced in 2021, with recommendations not to send emails outside of working hours to make sure that the barrier between work and private time could be clearly distinguished. Staff was always included in the decision-making through surveys and updates on matter related to the situation through a new HR newsletter.

Box 50: Good Practice

The CoR has set up a broad communication scheme, which took relevant staff into account (medical officers, logistics, meeting services, political departments, groups and members) whenever there was a decision to make. This was not a top-down process allowing staff to never be surprised by a decision and thus never opposing it, since they had been consulted during the whole process. This proved to be particularly important during a period of high uncertainty.

Source: Interview with the CoR SG Cabinet

Managers were also frequently reminded of the importance of showing flexibility towards their staff and finding ways of dealing with individual unexpected problems, such as home schooling or caring for relatives. Increased flexibility included the suspension of working hours registration, allowing to combine work and personal needs more easily. Moreover, all CoR staff has access to psychosocial support provided by the European Commission thanks to a service-level agreement. Some burnout cases were registered, and they have been dealt with using a personalised and tailored approach, providing emotional support and coaching techniques during the illness period and upon return to work.

Staff health

Protecting staff and members health was of utmost importance throughout the pandemic. To help staff during quarantine and illness during lockdowns, a group of volunteering staff members was created to help. This added to the social and medical service which was always ready to help colleagues with social and medical problems. The medical services were key in keeping in touch with people in difficult times, especially isolated ones at higher risk of burnouts and distress.

Productivity and performance

The overall performance of the institution has not been negatively influenced by teleworking. A shift in the managerial mindset was needed and managers were constantly reminded of the need for a flexible approach, especially when assessing the performance. Trust and results were emphasised as opposed to control-based management relying on hours worked. The HR urged managers to ensure the right to disconnect, for themselves and their staff.

Box 51: Insights from the interview with the CoR SG Cabinet

The different settings for staff who was used to managing teams in a 'traditional way' was destabilising. One issue is linked to how assess productivity and retain 'control': the experience showed that it worked much better than expected, thanks to ethics and sense of responsibility of staff.

Source: Interview with the CoR SG Cabinet

Long-term impact

Budgetary consequences

The effects of COVID-19 on the budget were significant in 2020. The budget had to be adapted to respond to the new challenges and needs.

Structural under investments in IT infrastructure was a well-known issue but still the CoR was surprised of the rapid need to have a better IT environment.

The CoR is a small institution, and so is its budget. However, its budget execution is of close to 100% every year for the real need of funds. This made it impossible to carry over budget during the years to proactively invest in IT. The IT environment was stable but undoubtedly not up to date for what concerns cybersecurity, services granted to staff and members and others. When the pandemic hit, savings were taken from other budget lines and transferred to upgrade the IT environment, key to ensure the CoR's functioning. What is considered important now, it to keep the rate of these investments to avoid setbacks and be performant.

Savings were mainly coming from meetings and travel allowances, interpretation, missions, and, to a lesser extent, building running costs. The additional expenditure directly caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is mainly related to medical services and IT, as mentioned above.

Lessons learnt, future challenges

The first lesson learnt from the pandemic is that crisis, by nature, are unexpected and institutions need to be better prepared, thus a revision of the Business Continuity Plan is required.

On the other hand, a crisis is a moment when things start to move, and it should be used as an opportunity to change what did not work before. This is what happened with the digitalisation of processes. Undoubtedly, these changes were all in the pipeline, but the pandemic acted as a catalyst for faster and widespread digitalisation, including videoconferencing and remote collaborative working methods. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis taught to be independent from physical contact and be quicker in the workflows.

However, these lessons constitute a challenge for the future because they require the development of new methods and ways of working. These challenges are related to the increased use of digitalisation and the consequent increased cybersecurity threats but also the need to invest in digital skills at all

staff levels. Given that these changes have come to stay, more investments are needed also in terms of infrastructure to be completely performant.

Box 52: Insights from interview with CoR SG Cabinet

It is impossible to digitalise all the processes inside an institution if the people at the top do not have basic digital skills and thus activities have to be carried out by someone else from their team. It is important that managers and directors lead by example and keep receiving training courses even when higher levels are reached. If not, the general development is hampered and slowed.

Source: Interview with the CoR SG Cabinet

Another challenge is linked to teleworking. It increased efficiency in some areas like performance and quantitative output, but what lacks is the human component in cooperation, brainstorming and teamwork. In January 2022, the CoR adopted a new rule of procedures establishing that all meetings should be in person. Now members have realised they can do some things more efficiently via digital tool, while they thought back then that in-person meetings worked better.

This will have an impact on building policy as well. The EC had announced a radical change for building policy, influencing other institutions to follow its lead. If a telework scheme is in place, then it cannot be done with the pre-pandemic building settings and spaces need to be reduced or at least rearranged accordingly. Civil servants cannot have a fixed workstation anymore, but 'hot desks', moving stations will be the norm, facilitated by the fact that everyone has a laptop. This must be done carefully to avoid social conflict among staff working in different institutions, but also to avoid a great impact on the institution's budgets.

CASE STUDY – EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS

Key challenges posed by the pandemic

One of the main challenges posed by the pandemic was the impossibility to carry out on-the-spot audits due to travel and sanitary restrictions. Additionally, all publications were on hold during the early months of the pandemic. The forced shift to digital due to remote working required everyone to adapt to these new methods and some of the audits got delayed. Moreover, with all the activities of the ECA going online, security monitoring and threat hunting had to be reinforced due to the rise of cyber-threats.

Box 53: Insights from the interview with the IT service

Ensuring a safe teleworking experience both from the user's side and from an operational perspective was a major challenge in the sudden shift to digital. ECA had to boost users' awareness about the cyber-security risks related to the telework, through training and communication. On the other hand, the vulnerability management process had to be streamlined for a quicker mitigation of software flaws in the VPN systems and other critical IT systems, which became a preferred target of cyber-threat actors. [...] The pandemic has been a catalyst of the evolution to a Zero Trust Architecture (ZTA), a new cyber-security paradigm based on an acknowledgement that threats exist both inside and outside traditional network boundaries. As a result, the evolution to ZTA is considered one of the strategic goals of ECA's cyber-security plan.

Source: Interview with the IT service, ECA

Internal working arrangement

Business continuity plan

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, the ECA already had a business continuity plan established by a crisis management organisation in 2014. However, the plan only focused on damages to the buildings such as fire, earthquakes, or floods. Although it did not foresee an event such as the Covid-19 crisis, it enabled to organise the first meeting of the Crisis Management Committee (CMC) at the very beginning of the crisis, on 25 February of 2020. Additionally, activating the business continuity plan allowed the rapid set up of a technical cell in charge of ensuring the continuous monitoring of the situation, preparing options to propose to the CMC, implementing its decisions, and preparing internal communications. The ECA IT services, in particular, were very well prepared and managed the switch to 100% teleworking for the entire staff and external contractors as early as 16 March 2020, without discontinuing the institution's activities.

Even though the business continuity plan proved to be very efficient in responding to the crisis outbreak, it now needs to change in order to be more agile, with a more efficient and clear decision-making process in times of crisis and covering more crisis scenarios.

IT tools and infrastructure

When the crisis started, all ECA staff was already equipped with laptops and had remote access connections thanks to the "Laptops for everybody" project launched in 2013. On 11 March 2020, unlimited VPN licenses were purchased and activated. By 16 March, the IT infrastructure had been upgraded to support the increased number of simultaneous connections (more than 900 users per day). In 2021, the ECA storage system was updated to cope with the increase of storage needs due to digitalisation.

After the start of the pandemic, almost all ECA work shifted online. Therefore, auditing was conducted remotely, using videoconferencing tools as well as secure data and document sharing. Internal and external stakeholders were introduced to Microsoft Teams by the end of March 2020, which facilitated working together. Access to the WebEx videoconferencing system was also provided in order to communicate with the external correspondents. Another new system was established for remote control voting which included guaranteed vote privacy and verifiability.

Box 54: Insights from the interview with the IT service

New solutions for hybrid meetings were developed, especially for Court and Administrative Committee meetings. The Conference room and the Court room were adapted for such hybrid meetings, and other rooms were adapted for press conferences, webinars, training, and other events. In order to facilitate meetings with Member States representatives, remote language interpretation possibilities were made available.

Source: Interview with the HR service, ECA

Furthermore, new systems were introduced to make remote work more comfortable and convenient. 'BibliotECA Discovery', a system that brings together all electronic resources, was introduced on 23 April 2020 with the aim of facilitating search and access to information. In addition, an 'Online Press' section has been made available on the intranet by the library which includes the 'PressReader' platform.

In the context of remote work, all critical IT systems remained fully available, especially since cybersecurity threats increased. New security-monitoring and threat-hunting systems have been deployed including email encryption to facilitate the exchange of sensitive files with external entities, as well as threat protection software for corporate mobile devices. Moreover, a new information classification policy was adopted in September 2020.

Box 55: Good practice

The adoption of online trainings and webinars was a new format which allowed people to attend trainings more easily. The access to professional training improved through e-learning and the ECA plans to keep it in the future (e.g. language courses, previously in a classroom setting) as employees suggest.

Source: Interview with the SG office, ECA

Teleworking

From 16 March 2020, the ECA's work went 100% online. Then from 15 June until September 2020 the teleworking ceiling changed from 10% to 50 %.

Prior to the pandemic, flexible arrangements regarding working modalities already existed, which allowed a rather smooth transition to the new working regime. Those arrangements included 2 hours per day for childcare and extended maternity leave.

Box 56: Good practice

Since March 2020, telework from abroad is allowed up to 5 days per month and a maximum of 30 days per year. People who had to care for a dependent family member had no ceiling for teleworking from abroad (this specific measure was a temporary measure which ended in July 2021).

Source: Interview with the SG office, ECA

Staff management and recruitment

At the start of the pandemic, traineeships were cancelled. Since October 2020, traineeships sessions have been reorganised and split in three sessions: from 1 March to 31 July, from 1 May to 30 September, and from 1 October to 28 (29) February.

Inter-institutional cooperation

From 13 March 2020, the ECA took an active part in the Covid-19 inter-institutional informal network aimed at allowing the exchange of information about the measures put in place to tackle the crisis. This group continues to meet regularly in order to coordinate actions between the different institutions. Additionally, communication channels were established to manage the crisis, along with an advisory scientific board and an inter-institutional medical board. Moreover, the ECA HR director is part of a committee called CALux (Collège des Chefs d'Administrations des institutions et organes de l'UE), which meets regularly in Luxembourg to discuss the situation and share information.

Effect on the staff

Staff satisfaction (work-life balance)

Two thirds of the respondents of a survey on staff wellbeing rated the overall teleworking experience as positive. However, even though most staff had a positive experience of teleworking, there were still some difficulties in separating professional and private lives. In this respect, many staff members declared that the 2-hour daily tolerance policy for childcare was an important support. At the same time, those who did not have regular team meetings or follow-up appointments suffered from isolation.

Staff health

At the start of the crisis, medical services managed to quickly buy medical equipment. Three procurement procedures were launched in order to set up stocks of health protection material such as masks, gel, tests etc. Another procurement procedure was initiated for in-house PCR COVID-19 naso-pharyngeal testing.

In addition, some measures were put in place to support staff health, such as workshops on practical mindfulness for stress reduction, extended free of charge psychological support offer, antiharassment policy specific to Covid.

Box 57: Insights from the interview with the SG Office

Managers were playing a pivotal role in supporting their team members and mitigating the harmful impact of overwork on their health and wellbeing.

Source: Interview with the SG office, ECA

Three new confidential counsellors were appointed to reinforce the existing network, a new well-being team was set up, and the Crisis Management Committee named a medical service counsellor. Moreover, in order to check on staff wellbeing during the pandemic, surveys were regularly conducted.

Regarding the health protocol, physical distancing measures and restrictions on the use of certain areas were enforced. Hydro-alcoholic gel dispensers and protective screens were installed, and cleaning operations were strengthened. Moreover, a meeting room got converted into a storage room where the staff could come and exchange their IT equipment safely.

Productivity and performance

The lack of discussions and casual chats as well as the inability to organise small events with staff affected ECA's team empowerment dynamic. Hence, to keep staff involved and motivated, managers had to make more efforts than usual, which was challenging.

Box 58: Insights from the interview with the Secretary General's Office

The crisis has proven the resilience of the ECA workforce. It has shown that the institution can function with less command and control. We can have more empowerment, autonomy and responsibility in our teams, while preserving the high quality of our work. However, this also means we will have to face new challenges, such as keeping team spirit alive, increasing social contact and reinforcing internal communication. Shifting focus from presence to results is a fundamental management goal in support of teleworking.

Source: Interview with the SG Office, ECA

Long-term impact

Budgetary consequences

The pandemic had a significant impact on the ECA budget. A one-time investment of EUR 245,000 has been done for the remote access extension, including EUR 150,000 for the increased number of licenses, EUR 25,000 for the increase of communications costs and related security measures, and EUR 70,000 to finance the increased ratio of laptops replacements. Additionally, EUR 90,000 were spent to transform the Conference Rooms and Court meeting rooms into hybrid, along with EUR 850,000 to replace the ECA storage system and EUR 35,000 for remote interpretation software and services. Moreover, EUR 10,000 were allocated to access the WebEx videoconferencing system, EUR 86,000 to implement BibliotECA Discovery project along with an annual cost of EUR 25,000 in license and maintenance fees, as well as an annual cost of EUR 21,000 for the PressReader site license.

Lessons learnt, future challenges

A study launched in 2021 named "K2030. Reimagining our workplace" aims at deciding on the future of the ECA oldest building taking into consideration the new hybrid way of working.

The emergence of new technological possibilities such as the "meta" technologies has an impact on digital working environments and requires the adjustment of strategies and methods. Those new technologies still need to be mastered. Moreover, strengthening cybersecurity must remain a key concern and be constantly updated.

Box 59: Insights from the interview with the IT service

A lot needs to be done in terms of skills and attitudes regarding this new paradigm that organisations are experiencing, not only because of the Covid pandemic. Other factors like environmental concerns will imply the reduction of office space and of on-site presence.

Source: Interview with the IT service, ECA

CASE STUDY – EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

Key challenges posed by the pandemic

The political activity of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) was particularly challenged during the pandemic. This was mainly due to the lack of meetings, which hampered but did not prevent from delivering high-quality and participatory political debates. In the political work, opinions were delivered based on preparatory work in Study groups. At the beginning, all the preparatory work of Members was stalled given that in-person meetings could not take place. To ensure business continuity, they immediately started to work on meetings online through Webex which used to have a section for study groups and meetings. However, the well-known structural backlog of investments in IT caused issues to the network performance which were fixed promptly by the efforts of IT department, thus ensuring a smooth and proper working activity.

Another challenge was the EESC mandate renewal in late 2020, when about half of members were substituted and new ones were appointed by Member States. Due to restrictions and the impossibility to travel in October 2020, the constitutive plenary session took place in hybrid format as well as the onboarding of new members. This was challenging for the IT and HR departments, but it was very successfully achieved.

What was also challenging regarding political activity was the fact that members do not receive any remuneration from the Committee but are only entitled to the reimbursement of travel expenses and related allowances. Since travelling was not possible and physical meetings did not take place, prior to June 2020 members were not reimbursed for the time they spent performing their duties. A temporary decision taken by the Bureau on 9 June 2020 covered the reimbursement of a daily allowance for EESC members attending EESC meetings remotely. This decision was necessary as a way to ensure business continuity and keep attendance rate sufficiently high and to ensure that a balanced geographical representation was respected. However, when it was clear that travel restrictions would last for a long period, the EESC Bureau decided to submit a structural proposal to the Council to regulate this matter.

Internal working arrangement

Business continuity plan

A business continuity plan was already in place at the start of 2020 to handle a range of different crises. This plan had been adapted after the Brussels terrorist attacks in 2016 but it was impossible to foresee every type of scenarios and it proved to be not entirely suitable for the exceptional pandemic situation, as it was too heavy to handle the scope and pace of the decision-making. That being said, the Committee managed to overcome these shortcomings by establishing a dedicated administrative COVID Task, led by the HR Director, who coordinated physical operations and technical aspects both within the EESC and with other institutions.

Box 60: Insights from the interview with the SG Team

Its work was very valuable and managed to keep the Committee abreast with the fast-changing measures and to make sure actions were taken complying both with Belgium legislation and with EU Treaties.

Source: Interview with the SG Team, EESC

Moreover, an ad-hoc group made up of six members was established with the mandate of preparing a way out of the pandemic. Starting from a reflection on the EESC's working methods, the goal was to develop strategies for a new normality in the post pandemic period that are in line with climate neutrality commitment and develop modern and efficient working methods.

Box 61: Good Practice

This can be considered a good practice as it supported the member in the short and long term and throughout the fast-changing regulation in Belgium.

Source: Interview with the SG Team, EESC

IT tools and infrastructure

Regarding IT, it is important to underline that this is a joint service between the CoR and the EESC. According to the interview with the IT service, the directorate was under-resourced when the pandemic arrived after years of structural under investments, unlike other institutions. However, unused appropriations in other areas due to COVID-19 were transferred to reinforce two budget lines related to IT, namely 'equipment and software' and 'IT services'.

The shift to full teleworking was challenging for the IT department which had to ensure that staff and members were equipped with tools and systems to allow the institution to operate fully remotely. The basic idea was to provide each end-user with a laptop. The demand was high in the first weeks, but together with the HR department, a priority scale about who should get a laptop first was established and the delivery was completed by the end of 2020. Another small simple measure was providing everyone with quality headphones.

One main issue was linked to the fact that IT is a support-intensive area and the helpdesk was overloaded with requests. The IT department surprisingly realised that two main activities required on-site presence: managing IT networks and helpdesk support. This was particularly challenging at the height of the crisis due to the impossibility to enter buildings. However, when it was possible, they were the first one to go back to work in presence.

In general, the approach in 2020 was to "survive" and ensure business continuity. This changed in 2021, when the focus shifted on improving IT services, also thanks to the results of a series of studies carried out to understand the needs and future investments that had to be prioritised. The IT preparedness was overall good and safe connection from home could be ensured. Technical changes were introduced to allow safer solutions or to generally improve the performance, given the higher number of people connected (from around 100 per day to 1,200).

The rollout of digital internal procedures was already planned thanks to the Digital Strategy adopted in each of the Committees in 2019, but actions were accelerated by the pandemic. Some platforms for ordinary administration were already there, but they were enhanced or adapted to support paperless workflows or to carry out actions online. For instance, the Members' Portal, to access working documents and related services for members' meetings, was already capable of supporting paperless meetings. Phoenix, a service used to manage members' expenses, was quickly adapted to claim expenses online. Adonis, the tool for managing internal documents workflows, was improved during the crisis to support paperless documents.

Continuous progress was made with e-invoicing and e-procurement, as the latter was previously available for large procedures only. A working group on electronic signatures was established.

Box 62: Insights from interview with the CoR/EESC IT service

The fact there was a digital strategy in place and that it was being implemented meant the CoR-EESC IT service was quite well prepared to accelerate throughout the crisis. They did not start from scratch, very little had to be done in terms of enhancement and specific developments were quickly completed.

Source: Interview with the IT service, CoR/EESC

Regarding videoconferencing and meetings, the Committee needed to upscale existing systems and tools or use new platforms. For the plenary sessions, a platform called Interactio was used, as it allowed to hold meetings with interpretations. Since June 2021, statutory meetings were held in hybrid mode, through Interactio. Meetings initially required significant support and interventions from the IT department.

Regarding e-voting, an application that facilitated online and in-person voting during hybrid and fully online CoR meetings was developed. In addition, e-voting was used as well for staff committee elections, further showing the shift to digital in internal workflows.

Box 63: Good Practice

At the beginning, the number of languages in meetings was reduced because they could not get interpreters for consecutive interpretation. However, when a member could not speak a lingua franca, they had to find a solution that allowed the Committee work to continue. This resulted in the introduction of automatic subtitles in English which was independent of the shortages/unavailability of interpreters. These transcriptions were then translated into other languages using AI.

Source: Interview with the SG Team, EESC

Teleworking

The EESC has had a flexible teleworking scheme since 2010, and occasional and structural telework was established with a pilot project in 2011. However, the pandemic forced to speed things up and to relax some other measures in order to ensure business continuity.

On 16 March 2020, all staff were instructed to telework on a full-time basis. The result was that the IT helpdesk was completely overloaded with requests of assistance. IT is in fact a support-intensive sector and the quick transition from onsite to off-site working did not help first-time users who needed physical support, i.e., bringing laptop to maintenance or new users who had to be onboarded.

Additional flexibility was allowed regarding teleworking from abroad to reduce mental strains on staff members.

From 2 July, voluntary return to the office became possible but teleworking remained the norm until the end of the year.

Staff management and recruitment

The recruitment of trainees was not affected as it was already fully digital. However, in the spring session, the majority of trainees decided to suspend their traineeship. Who decided to go on with the traineeship provided positive feedbacks. Regarding presence and equipment, the same treatment was applied to trainees and to the staff. On-site learning and training sessions were moved to online mode and regular feedback sessions were organised to maintain close contact with them and address any issue that might have arisen.

Inter-institutional cooperation

The EESC cooperated closely with the CoR, given that the two Committees share buildings and joint services. From the beginning, cooperation went beyond the Cooperation Agreement and extra efforts were needed in some areas such as buildings, hygiene measures, cleaning protocols etc, always ensuring institutional autonomy. Coordination and communication were also facilitated by the presence of business continuity officers in both bodies.

Box 64: Insights from the interview with the SG

Whatever we did, we tried to align with the CoR. Even though it was a huge job in parallel for both Committees, it was important to take identical decisions for IT and for HR to avoid inequalities among staff.

Source: Interview with the SG EESC

Cooperation was not easy and not everything could be identical the extra work was necessary for the sake of the staff. A sizeable number of people work for both (from an administrative point of view might be hired by one only) but coordination was key especially for them.

It is worth mentioning that a new cooperation agreement was signed on 20 October 2021 and entered into force on 1 November 2021 by which some areas of administrative cooperation will be strengthened by widening the services included in the Joint Services and deepening cooperation in other areas, such as IT financing and organisational structure. On a more practical level, the Committees are committed to optimise the use of space and to introduce meeting facilities. The new agreement will be in force until the end of 2026.

Regarding cooperation with other institutions, the EESC took part in the Business Continuity network of all the institutions and in the Inter-institutional Medical Board (CMI). Moreover, the EESC Medical Service actively participated in the vaccination campaign for staff and members organised by the Commission and further to a service-level agreement with the European Parliament, EESC members were allowed to use the Parliament's PCR testing facility.

Effect on the staff

Staff satisfaction (work-life balance)

In order to assess the staff satisfaction regarding work-life balance, the EESC launched two surveys: one in May 2020 and one in spring 2021 (carried out jointly with the CoR). A third survey is planned for mid-2022. The results were quite positive also thanks to additional flexibility such as the cancellation of work time registration allowed staff to adapt their schedules to personal needs, particularly useful for people at home with children, home schooling, or other difficult private situations, who were contacted proactively and applied a more tailored approach. These measures allowed staff to balance and better control their work-life schedule. Additional measures such as a newsletter with tips to cope with long term teleworking and lockdowns were implemented. Moreover, the impossibility to commute to work and the time saved had a positive impact on work-life balance as well.

Staff health

The administration also took a series of measures to protect the health and safety of staff and of members. The Medical Service was staffed with two part-time doctors, one of them a specialist in infectious diseases and health was discussed with the medical advisor and the social worker.

Regarding mental health, new communication channels were needed to minimise the effects of the crisis on the mental health. One was the “Bureaux Volants”, where important topics were presented in a live video format and staff could ask questions, file complaints etc.

Usual channels were also used to provide psychological support to help people cope with teleworking and family life. Practical advice, proposed activities, training sessions and conferences on wellbeing were also shared with colleagues through articles in HR newsletters.

Sick leaves were contacted individually and carefully followed up by the medical services, especially if thought to be related to mental health issues. Moreover, a psychologist could be consulted remotely, and home visits were also possible, in case of absolute necessity.

Teleworking from abroad was carefully evaluated for those who requested it and contributed to alleviating psychological distress. General satisfaction and health emerged from the surveys as well.

Productivity and performance

The pandemic affected the way staff performance was assessed, more difficult to do when people are not in the office. The focus was then shifted on the results rather than physical presence and only what is easily measurable was assessed.

Box 65: Insights from the interview with the SG Team

This new situation also requested a shift in the mindset, especially from a managerial point of view. New skills were required to handle a team from home, coordinating it and making sure that no one was left behind. From one day to another even managers against teleworking were forced to make it work. Someone who used to be a strong opponent of teleworking has changed their minds.

Source: Interview with the SG Team, EESC

Long-term impact

Budgetary consequences

The COVID-19 crisis resulted in savings coming from budget lines for members' travel costs and allowances, as well as on those covering interpretation, staff missions and the organisation of events and hearings, including catering related to events. These were used to deal with the backlog of investments in IT and buildings, as well as covering other needs arising from this exceptional situation.

Lessons learnt, future challenges

In September 2020 the EESC held the first seminar of board of directors about lessons learnt, focusing on what worked, what did not and the issues to be addressed in the future. The process is not over, and a new Business Continuity Plan will be adopted in line with the lessons learnt.

One main lesson regards cooperation with other EU institutions and reinforcement of contacts with Belgian authorities. Strengthen coordination and cooperation at HR level was helpful as well during the crisis. Collaboration with the CoR was also deepened and went beyond the formal collaboration regulated by the Cooperation Agreement and the EESC is willing to continue in this direction.

Other lessons learnt are coming from positive experiences, regarding digitalisation of the institution's operations, videoconferencing, paperless workflows and remote collaborative working methods.

New challenges will be posed by new workspace organisation. During the pandemic, due to shortage of rooms and the distance that had to be respected (one every 2-3 seats), building capacity had shrunk and thus remote delivery was needed in order to accommodate all the meetings. A TeleFlex scheme started following trade union negotiations on work time and presence in the office. A pilot project which includes 2-3 days per week will run for 6 months and then it will be assessed. This will have a wider impact on the need of workspaces and buildings, with mobile workstations and reduction of density. However, contracts for buildings and renovations have been signed and the Committee cannot break it.

CASE STUDY – EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE

Key challenges posed by the pandemic

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on EEAS activities was significant, as these were slowed down and hampered. One of the main challenges was the repatriation of around 600,000 EU citizens from around the world whilst organising and managing a large-scale humanitarian and assistance operation to help partners around the world in dealing with the pandemic. The outbreak of the pandemic had an immediate impact on the EEAS's Directorate General for Budget and Administration services (DG BA) which had to put extra efforts in coordinating activities and ensuring business continuity, while always prioritising staff health.

Internal working arrangement

Business continuity plan

According to the information collected through desk analysis, the EEAS does not mention having a Business Continuity Plan to implement in the moment of crisis. However, the Institution reports to have successfully remained fully operational both at the Headquarters and in the Delegations across the world, ensuring business continuity of operations and of diplomatic activities.

A Core Crisis Team (CCT) was established by DG BA, where senior managers and staff from relevant teams, including the medical cell, met daily to assess the latest developments and coordinate actions.

IT tools and infrastructure

The sudden shift to full teleworking required an upgrade and upscale of EEAS IT infrastructures, facilitated by innovation projects managed and implemented since 2019. This allowed for a smooth switch to teleworking, including the external staff. However, some measures to upgrade and upscale the services were needed. These included accelerating the migration to Windows 10 and increasing the security of connection allowing for remote working, and the set-up of videoconferencing systems.

Regarding hardware, staff, including delegations, were provided with a corporate laptop and equipment loans (screens, keyboard, etc) were organised on request to support working from home. No other financial benefit was granted. Since October 2020, trainees also received a laptop from the EEAS. The IT helpdesk was re-arranged to allow for remote working, including telephone entry point.

Teleworking

In March 2020, the EEAS authorised teleworking in Headquarters and Delegations according to evolving local rules. Thus, the EEAS Headquarters in Brussels had to comply with rules set by the Belgian authorities, regarding travel and presence in the office. As of 16 March 2020, all the EEAS staff were required to work from home, except from essential staff whose presence in the office was needed. Vulnerable staff from delegations were authorised to telework from Brussels or their place of origin.

A task force called "Return to the office" was set up in mid-April 2020 with the scope of developing a strategy and guidelines for a gradual return to office, in light of the easing of lockdown and restrictions in Belgium.

Staff management and recruitment

An increase in workload during the crisis was due to the issue of new guidelines and procedures to respond to the fast-changing situation, especially concerning HR processes, namely recruitment, selection and rotation.

Recruitment of trainees was suspended in March 2020, and those who had just started were allowed to carry out the traineeship remotely. Recruitment restarted in June 2020, although within the limits of existing travel restrictions. However, no new traineeship was allowed to start if the trainee had to quarantine or telework. Given the partial closure of the EC Medical Service, the EEAS Medical Service took over the pre-recruitment fitness assessment for the EEAS candidates for EU Delegations and did 50 pre-deployment checks.

Inter-institutional cooperation

During the pandemic, the EEAS participated regularly in meeting and exchanges with Human Resource departments of Member States Ministries of Foreign Affairs and with the UN to share views and best practices. In addition, it took part in the weekly inter-institutional meetings organised by the Commissions such as the Crisis Coordination Committee, the COVID-19 inter-institutional coordination meetings and the Inter-institutional Medical College. This allowed for mutual exchange of information, updates, and best practices, ensuring coordination at institutional level.

Effect on the staff

Staff satisfaction (work-life balance)

In addition to measures to tackle the health crisis, the EEAS continued to promote a healthy work-life balance and family-friendly policies, which include the use of flexible working arrangements and information and communication sessions. During the pandemic, according to single situations, teleworking outside the place of employment was allowed for staff with complex family situations, even though for a limited period. Additional flexibility was granted to staff with disabled children and with staff with reduced mobility.

Indeed, the digitalisation of workflows increased efficiency and flexibility but also the risk of not being able to separate private and professional lives, with a constant on-call culture. Given that there was no specific policy on the 'right to disconnect', some rules were adopted to address this shortcoming, including a 'do not disturb' rule from 7PM to 8AM and recommendations about not sending emails outside working hours, limit notifications to reduce stress and anxiety, and about limited use of personal phones, if not strictly necessary. Staff were also encouraged to reduce length and number of videocalls and videoconferences to ensure that enough time was spent 'off screen'. A pulse survey was launched in May 2020 to enquire about the adjustment to teleworking, its psychological effects and a possible return to the office.

Staff health

Every measure taken was always to ensure the health and safety of all EEAS staff, both in Headquarters and EU Delegations.

Regarding building policy, measures were taken to ensure social distancing, especially in common areas. This included markings on the floor, decreased capacity of meeting rooms and social areas. Hand sanitiser dispensers were placed across the buildings and cleaning was enhanced, with a stricter protocol also addressing the disinfection of offices and contact points (door handles, lifts, etc.). Moreover, ventilation and air conditioning were modified, and plexiglass panels were installed to protect front-line staff.

Two mailboxes were created, one mainly addressing medical issues. To prevent psychological distress, an ad-hoc mailbox was opened to provide psychological support to staff, associated with the EEAS psychologists and managed by EEAS Mediation team. A specific help line, called Help in Confinement,

was made available for colleagues with any type of professional or personal issues who could rely on a team of volunteers open to listen, offer guidance and suggest resources. Information regarding rules and protocols about COVID-19 was published on the intranet by the Medical Cell which also provided psychological support.

Productivity and performance

In order to adapt to the pandemic situation, training sessions were moved to online modality. The EEAS was gradually moving from physical to virtual classrooms long before COVID-19, responding to the need to better serve the staff in Delegations, but the pandemic accelerated this shift dramatically. Until March 2020, about 43% of courses were already offered online but this number went up to 92% for the rest of the year. This increased the audience reached, also from other institutions, but also the offer.

Long-term impact

Budgetary consequences

The impact of the pandemic on the budget resulted in large savings from salaries and emoluments in Headquarters and Delegations, since all recruitment procedures were slowed down. This resulted in significantly higher vacancy rates than normal. Further significant savings were made on the items for missions, meetings, conferences and congresses due to travel restrictions and lockdowns, and many infrastructure-related items such as fitting-out and furniture, guarding costs, office supplies and heating and cleaning.

Part of these savings were transferred and used to reinforce IT and telecommunication budget lines, such as hardware, software licenses, network connectivity and firewall licenses, due to the increased need for communication and for the upgrade of video conferencing systems to enable the business continuity. Additional expenses were related to medical evacuation and the reimbursement of internet costs in some Delegations.

Lessons learnt, future challenges

The pandemic was a lesson in many areas, especially regarding better preparedness for future crises and emergencies.

Having an ad-hoc task force, such as the Core Crisis Team proved to be key in dealing with crisis management, as the staff had previous experience and expertise, with clear roles and responsibilities, which made communication and decision-making smoother and timelier. To increase preparedness, the EEAS plan is to map the availability of key experts and skills, training staff especially at Headquarters.

At the same time, it is important that the organisation is reformed with a more streamlined approach to make it more resilient, flexible, and agile. The plan is to reassess its essential functions to better ensure business continuity.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has showed that the administration must be ready to deal with unprecedented, sudden events. Both teleworking and digitalisation of workflows should be sustained in the future. This will also have an impact on building policy and a decreased need of space, towards more collaborative settings with a modern and flexible working environment.

CASE STUDY – EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Key challenges posed by the pandemic

European parliamentary democracy has been challenged by the restrictive measures taken by the EU and Member States to limit the spread of the virus. Compliance with the EU decision-making process and rules on voting as well as interpretation capacity were necessary to guarantee legislative and budgetary powers and political scrutiny. Moreover, even though the Parliament had already considered extraordinary working conditions, it could not predict the measures put in place because of the pandemic such as lockdown or border closures, and thus had to adapt to these challenging circumstances.

Box 66: Insights from the interview with the HR service

On most aspects, the EP was prepared, but needed to adapt to the unprecedented circumstances. For instance, It was already prepared in terms of teleworking because it had already extensive experience, and it already was in the process of adapting itself to more flexible working arrangements. At the same time, it was not prepared (did not expect) for the scale of teleworking implementation as it was not possible to foresee a similar situation. However, the EP demonstrated to be an adaptable organisation.

Source: Interview with the HR service of the Parliament

Since both the EP administrative and political activities were held online due to the spread of the coronavirus, another major challenge that emerged was the necessity to ensure cybersecurity. The remote voting system implemented to safeguard the continuity of parliamentary democracy had to be secure.

Internal working arrangement

Business continuity plan

Prior to the pandemic, the Parliament already had its own Business Continuity Plan (BCP), which outlines general principles on how to treat incidents, the definition of the core activities of the institution and their recovery time objectives that Directorates-General must respect in the establishment of their individual BCPs.

Box 67: Insights from the interview with the EP IT service

The maturity of the institution's Business Continuity systems is the key which contributed to the appropriate management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: Interview with the IT service of the Parliament

Along with the existing Business Continuity Plan, the Rules of Procedures of the Parliament were updated one year after the beginning of the pandemic in order to reinforce digitalisation. These allowed the smooth introduction of large teleworking regimes, remote voting system and participation tools, as well as online debating. Moreover, the Parliament's business continuity culture improved, in particular thanks to the organisation of additional trainings.

IT tools and infrastructure

The reinforcement of IT support by DG ITEC allowed to provide EP staff with teleworking equipment. 10,000 hybrid laptops were provided, along with accessories for remote work such as chairs, screens, keyboards, and headphones. Moreover, remote voting solutions for the Plenary and committee

meetings and new videoconferencing tools have been developed. Additional digital solutions for collaboration and communication designated by DG ITEC are currently in pilot mode.

Box 68: Insights from the interview with the IT service

DG ITEC enabled its users to select among a set of ICT solutions suiting the best their needs:

- i. *the existing conferencing solutions such as Jabber for ad-hoc meetings and quick chats and the use of multipoint in Jabber for small internal meetings; and WebMeeting, to connect with people beyond the usual stakeholders in a confidential manner;*
- ii. *additional solutions such as WebEx (fully deployed) and WebEx Events (solution supporting virtual meetings with moderators, panelists, and participants).*

Source: Interview with the IT service of the Parliament

DG ITEC also allowed the EP Liaison Offices (EPLO) to take part in plenary debates thanks to the establishment of a remote intervention capability with a guaranteed high-speed connection and appropriate timing management. In addition, the context of the pandemic increased the use of EU-certified qualified electronic signatures through the Parliament's digital signature application (DISP), which now apply for almost all framework contracts and specific contracts (only very few contractors still do not have an EU-certified signature). However, the Parliament expects to see their use become widespread and that all contractors will soon use EU-certified electronic signature.

With all the Parliament's activities going online, cybersecurity experts from the CISO team were in charge of ensuring the highest level of security within the institution's teleworking area, in order to handle cybersecurity threats.

IT expenses for the replacement of all desktop computers by hybrid computers to allow all Parliament's work to go online were already planned in the multiannual roll-out plan before the start of the pandemic. The spread of Covid-19 just accelerated the process.

DG ITEC had anticipated the need for these technologies in the context of its dual Corporate and Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) mobility strategy.

Teleworking

From March to September 2020, plenary sessions were held remotely, and replaced by mini sessions in Brussels. From the 8 April 2020, remote voting at plenaries and in parliamentary committees was implemented. Parliament's staff teleworking regime went from 70% on 11 March 2020, to 100% on 16 March (staff in all services as well as political bodies worked remotely). On 16 July 2021, three different levels of teleworking were established: standard, moderate, and maxi.¹⁶ It is worth noting that each employee can select the level of teleworking that considers most suitable.

Box 69: Insights from the interview with the HR service

"A special register was created, and staff was asked to register; this allowed to check the staff presence in the premises. Instructions to control were also provided to managers."

Source: Interview with the HR service of the Parliament

¹⁶ 'Standard' teleworking entails one day of teleworking per week (20%), 'moderate' teleworking entails two days of teleworking per week (40%), and 'maxi' teleworking entails three days of teleworking per week (60%).

In order to make working at home as comfortable and productive as possible, the Parliament decided on a few working arrangements. It introduced the possibility of doing part-time work for families with disabled children (maintaining a full salary). Additionally, formal arrangements were established for expatriate staff who wanted to return to their home countries.

Staff management and recruitment

During the period from March to June 2020, the Parliament only recruited for the DGs involved in the handling of devices. All recruitment is now centralised in one unit and carried out through a new selection process with the Apply4EP platform, and documents are transmitted digitally.

From March until June 2020, traineeships were also suspended.

Inter-institutional cooperation

An agreement was reached with the Office of the EU Ombudsman regarding cooperation on crisis and business continuity management, and an SMS crisis communication system was implemented. Moreover, meetings with business continuity correspondents from other institutions were organised in order to coordinate measures to address the pandemic. Medical staff from each institution also regularly exchanged and an inter-institutional medical board intended to coordinate the institutions' efforts was created.

Box 70: Insights from the interview with the SG office

Inter-institutional cooperation was based on regular exchanges between the HR departments of the different institutions, who considered the main challenges and existing best good practices, particularly on staff regulations.

Source: Interview with the Office of the Secretary General

Effects on the staff

Staff satisfaction (work-life balance)

At the beginning of the pandemic, DG HR organised conferences addressed to managers on how to deal with the new challenges and the EP set up a telephone line designed to solve issues which could arise. The crisis changed staff management within the Parliament, whose strategy has been adapted to be more focused on results, trust, and care. Measures to contribute to a better work-life balance were implemented, such as flexibility of working time, temporary derogation to telework 100% from abroad etc. Overall, a great majority of the staff positively evaluated their teleworking experience (85% of staff positively evaluated their overall teleworking experience during the COVID-19 crisis in a survey conducted twice in 2020). However, there are still some improvements to be made, regarding, for instance, equal treatment and the impact of participation for everyone attending a meeting, whether remote or in person.

Box 71: Insights from the interview with the HR service

There are two sides of teleworking. If teleworking is applied "correctly", it can be a very important measure to ensure a better balance between work and private life. However, it can also be the contrary. Because if teleworking is not applied correctly, it can end up in a situation where people work continuously and right to disconnect is not respected, which would not benefit at all the balance between work and private life.

Source: Interview with the HR service of the Parliament

Staff health

Before the start of the pandemic, the EP already had a mental health programme as well as a network of mental health aiders with members of all DGs. The network has expanded with the crisis, with six additional posts opened in the Medical Service, and six interim nurses hired. After the start of the pandemic, psychological support and assistance to vulnerable people were provided to support staff health. This support included doctors available and a telephone helpline, "Talk to me". Moreover, a test centre has been installed within the EP premises.

Box 72: Insights from the interview with the HR service

DG HR noted that, in particular, staff who was cut off from physical contacts with family members (e.g. EP staff with family members living abroad) and EP staff living alone were the two categories that experienced more frequently psycho-social problems (e.g. anxiety).

Source: Interview with the HR service of the EP

Managers were also provided with some guidance on how to handle the situation, with trainings to help them to deal with remote working, staff wellbeing and right to disconnect, as well as side effects of extensive teleworking.

Regarding the health protocol, a valid EU digital Covid certificate and a face mask are mandatory to enter the premises, as is body temperature check. Moreover, a track-and-trace team is responsible for managing case contact tracing, and MEPs were required to do a test before returning to their home country. The health protocol also included the mandatory wearing of gloves and masks for cleaning staff at all times.

Box 73: Insights from the interview with the SG service

The EP was also the first institution that introduced the COVID pass as entry requirement – i.e., to enter the premises - and this helped a lot to control and to assess the in-house transmission chain. This aspect was very important since "if you lose control on this, you lose control on quarantine and contamination and you could potentially have all staff in all directorates contaminated".

Source: Interview with the SG service of the Parliament

Productivity and performance

The EP noted that teleworking has made staff more productive because people tend to work more (e.g., around one additional hour per day) since they do not spend time commuting. More precisely, DG HR remarked that staff worked more at the beginning of the pandemic, when everyone was still adapting to the new measures. Nevertheless, teleworking affected the team building and the networking components negatively.

Box 74: Good practices

The EP HR Directorate suggests what the EP showed to be strongest in this process was the feeling of solidarity among colleagues. And after that, the EP built upon this with some formal procedures for staff health and social support measures both for staff and managers. This point was crucial for DG HR. Despite the fact that the EP did not adopt formal guidelines on this, the DG organised monthly meetings with all other services to discuss and monitor health and social wellbeing. On this basis, the different DGs of the EP have provided informal guidance to staff.

Source: Interview with the HR service of the Parliament

Long-term impact

Budgetary consequences

The pandemic increased the expenditure of the EP on some headings, e.g. as contracts with laboratories have been obtained to carry out PCR tests, a Covid-19 screening centre has been opened in the institution's premises, new IT equipment and systems were necessary etc. However, the pandemic allowed for important saving in terms of budget, and in 2020 a net surplus of around EUR 120 million was generated.¹⁷ This is mainly due to the fact that during the pandemic there were no sponsor visitors, and less activities as missions, conferences, training, study visits etc. took place. Further savings also occurred with respect to the budget for freelance interpreters (due to the reduced number of events). With a view to the future, the EP is currently internally discussing the possibility to continue conducting some meetings remotely (e.g. hearing of external experts) and services (e.g. interpretation work). If adopted, these decisions might guarantee permanent savings in specific headings of the EP budget.¹⁸

Lessons learnt, future challenges

The crisis adaptation tools developed in the context of the pandemic laid the foundations for dealing with future crises. The new working modalities which contains televoting, remote interventions and interpretation will continue to apply. The new working scheme on teleworking will also allow the EP to have a certain flexibility that might be very useful in case of a future crisis,¹⁹ as in that cases all staff would work again from home three days per week. Indeed, one of the key lessons learned is that flexibility was very important to deal with the different challenges linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, and therefore there is a strong need of maintaining this attitude in the future. Moreover, the Parliament is willing to develop its digital services and workflows.

Box 75: Insights from the interview with the IT service

In 2021, DG ITEC defined a "post-Covid vision" based on the following key pillars:

- 4) *Hybrid: or the ability to transition from physical to digital environments as seamlessly as possible (i.e. it doesn't matter where you are, with what you work, you're still part of the EP digital environment).*
- 5) *Intelligent: or the ability to deliver different flavours of the same service to better match users' preferences and savviness (self-service, desk service, personalised/advanced service). Intelligent both refers to the possibilities of automation and analytics, but also to the smart way of using our resources, by being there when it matters for the users and let them do when they want and know how to do it.*
- 6) *Confident and Secure: or the need to have compliance and cybersecurity by-design in the production chain, but also to provide confidence to the users and clients (i.e. that they have all the knowledge/info they need in order to keep the overall environment sustainable and safe).*

Source: Interview with the IT service of the Parliament

However, these changes have a cost: they require infrastructure investments and new IT developments such as cloud expertise, security, and service design. Furthermore, these new services must be accompanied by training for the staff who will use them, and by principles, rules, and behaviours about the Parliament's hybrid work environment.

Additionally, the Parliament considers that some types of teamwork / team building, innovation and client outreach are difficult to be done remotely.

¹⁷ Document on the answers by the Secretary-General to the questions tabled by Members of the Committee on Budgetary Control in the preparation to the decision on the European Parliament's discharge for budgetary and financial management of the year 2020, page 24.

¹⁸ This new scenario would not only allow to save costs, but it would also be more environmentally friendly.

¹⁹ E.g. the EP SG could decide at any moment that 3 days of teleworking become mandatory for everyone.

In order to provide the Members of the Budgetary Control Committee with reliable information and data on the COVID-19 response of the EU public administration, the study analyses the EU institutions' response, their business continuity measures and their impact on the budget from 2020 onwards and staff of the respective institution. Furthermore, the study provides an overview of practices and challenges around the new working modalities EU institutions are adopting for the post-pandemic future, as well as recommendations for the way forward.
