

Special report

The coordination role of the European External Action Service

Mostly working effectively, but some weaknesses
in information management, staffing and
reporting



EUROPEAN
COURT
OF AUDITORS

Contents

	Paragraph
Executive summary	I-IX
Introduction	01-13
EEAS structure	04-05
The EEAS's coordinating role	06-09
The EEAS's resources	10-11
EEAS reform	12-13
Audit scope and approach	14-20
Observations	21-99
EEAS headquarters: an internal review led to improved working methods but weaknesses remain in information management	21-44
Comprehensive review carried out but without a clear action plan or timetable	22-24
Improved working arrangements and guidelines	25-27
Information management tools do not fully support coordination	28-44
The EEAS and EU delegations: frequent communication fosters coordination but delegations miss feedback from EEAS HQ on planning and political reporting	45-65
High-level oversight is backed by good bilateral communication between EEAS HQ and the EU delegations	46-49
Delegations receive clear instructions from EEAS HQ but planning is hampered by EEAS HQ delays and lack of feedback	50-65
EEAS coordination with the Commission and the Council is working effectively despite challenges in EU delegations	66-99
Coordination with the Commission is managed well but operational challenges exist in EU delegations	67-87
Coordination with the Council is well established but there is no common briefing tool	88-99
Conclusions and recommendations	100-112

Annexes

Annex I – EEAS organisation chart

Annex II – EXCO role and process

Abbreviations

Glossary

Replies of the European External Action Service

Timeline

Audit team

Executive summary

I The European External Action Service (EEAS) is the diplomatic service of the European Union, working together with the EU institutions to implement the EU's common foreign and security policy. It supports the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who has a dual role, serving also as Vice-President of the European Commission. The EEAS therefore plays an important coordinating role with both the Commission and the Council.

II Staff at EEAS headquarters in Brussels and the 145 EU delegations and offices located around the world include the EEAS's own employees, external staff, staff seconded by the Commission and diplomats delegated by the member states. This rather complex situation heightens the importance of coordination in the EEAS's work.

III EU foreign policy and its implementation and coordination is of vital importance to the EU, especially given recent events, notably regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Our objective in this audit was to determine whether the EEAS performed its coordination role effectively and make recommendations for improvement. To do this, we examined coordination within its headquarters and with the High Representative/Vice-President's private office, with the EU delegations in non-EU countries, with multiple Directorates-General in the Commission, and with the Council and European Council.

IV Overall, we conclude that coordination is mostly effective, allowing the service to properly support the High Representative/Vice-President to deliver their mandate. However, we found some weaknesses in information management, staffing and reporting.

V The 2021 EEAS internal review exercise identified weaknesses and proposed changes in areas such as organisational structure, working arrangements and guidelines. However, an action plan and timetable on the implementation of the review actions was lacking, and we identified several problem areas in information management, including the use of IT tools.

VI EUDEL, the advisory body to the Commission and the EEAS on the management of EU delegations, is a useful forum for coordination. In addition, EEAS headquarters and EU delegations maintain frequent communication and the former has established clear procedures for EU delegations to fulfil their planning and reporting requirements. However, we found there were some delays in the provision of instructions from EEAS

headquarters as well as a lack of feedback to EU delegations, which negatively affected the usefulness of certain reports.

VII High-level coordination with the Commission via the Group for External Coordination functions effectively, which meets on a weekly basis. However, the more strategic Commissioners' Group on a Stronger Europe has been inactive since 2021. Operational coordination between the EEAS and the Commission through interservice consultation is good at headquarters level, but efforts are required between them to adapt staffing to needs in EU delegations.

VIII Coordination with the Foreign Affairs Council is, on the whole, well established and governed by clear rules and guidelines. However, coordinated preparation of briefings for meetings is hampered by the lack of a common briefing tool across the EEAS, Council and Commission.

IX On the basis of these conclusions, we recommend that the EEAS:

- ensure the implementation of its information management strategy;
- coordinate with the Commission and Council to improve the secure exchange of information;
- improve interaction between EEAS headquarters and EU delegations in the areas of planning, reporting and feedback;
- facilitate the follow-up of the 2022 workload assessment in EU delegations;
- improve interinstitutional cooperation regarding briefing tools for the preparation of Foreign Affairs Council meetings.

Introduction

01 The European External Action Service (EEAS) is the diplomatic service of the European Union. Since 2011, it has worked together with the EU institutions to carry out the EU's common foreign and security policy.

02 The EEAS was created by the [Treaty of Lisbon](#) to assist the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who also serves as Vice-President of the Commission and Chair of the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC). This combined position is hereinafter abbreviated as "HR/VP". According to Article 18 of the [Treaty on European Union](#), the HR/VP "shall ensure the consistency of the Union's external action", including its common foreign, security and defence policies.

03 The EEAS is also charged with assisting the President of the European Council, the President of the Commission, and the Commission's directorates-general (DGs) and services in their respective external relations functions. Finally, its role is to act as a facilitator and honest broker to manage the EU's diplomatic relations with non-EU countries and with international organisations. Therefore, the EEAS operates within a rather complex organisational set-up.

EEAS structure

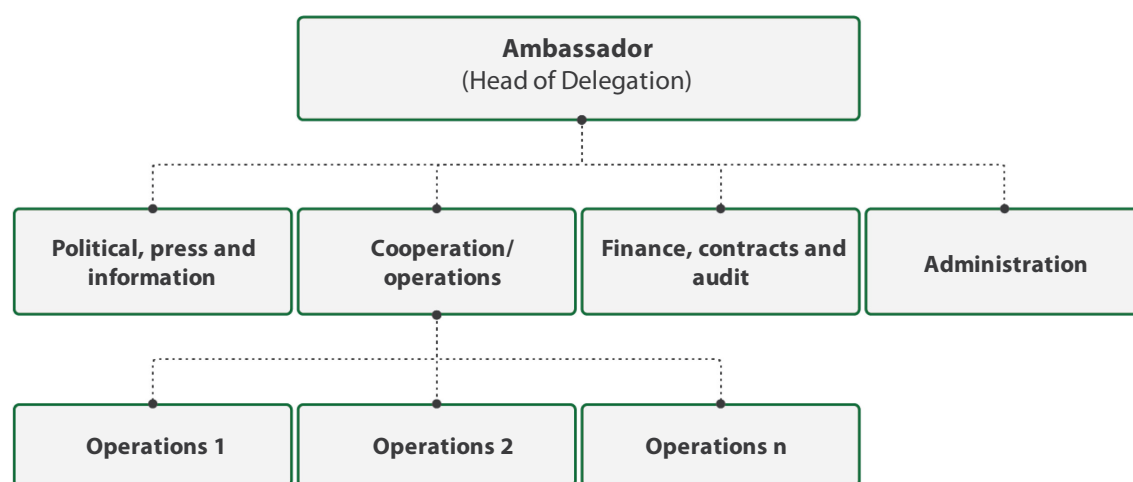
04 The EEAS is made up of a central administration in Brussels and EU delegations and offices (hereinafter: "EU delegations") located around the world¹. The EEAS Secretary-General, assisted by three Deputy Secretaries-General, oversees most of the daily work at the EEAS headquarters (EEAS HQ) in Brussels, with the aim of ensuring effective coordination between all departments and with the EU delegations, which serve as the EU's diplomatic missions in the world. In line with the EEAS decision², the EEAS is divided into six geographical and four thematic directorates (see [Annex I](#)). The EEAS also has planning and crisis response departments for the common security and defence policy. The EU's military staff provide military expertise within the EEAS and advise the HR/VP on military and security issues.

¹ [Council Decision 2010/427/EU](#) (the "EEAS Decision").

² Article 4(3) of the [EEAS Decision](#).

05 In addition to the central services in EEAS HQ, the EEAS comprises 145 EU delegations, eight of which are assigned to international organisations. The EU delegations represent the EU externally, projecting its foreign policy in non-EU countries or at international organisations. While the set-up of EU delegations may vary according to policy priorities (e.g. EU delegations in enlargement countries have a “European integration” section), they generally share a common basic structure (see [Figure 1](#)). Having initially focused predominantly on development assistance, trade and enlargement, most have now assumed a broader foreign policy, security and political role, reflecting the increasing external dimension of almost all EU policies.

Figure 1 – Sample organisation chart of an EU delegation



Source: ECA.

The EEAS's coordinating role

06 The Treaty on European Union sets out the provisions for the EU's external action, and stipulates that the HR/VP shall assist the Council and the Commission in cooperating to ensure the consistency of EU action and its international policies³. The HR/VP is in turn supported by the EEAS⁴. The EEAS's coordinating role comprises two main strands: coordination with the Commission, and coordination with the Council and European Council (see [Figure 2](#)).

³ Article 21(3) of the [Treaty on European Union](#).

⁴ Article 2 of the [EEAS Decision](#).

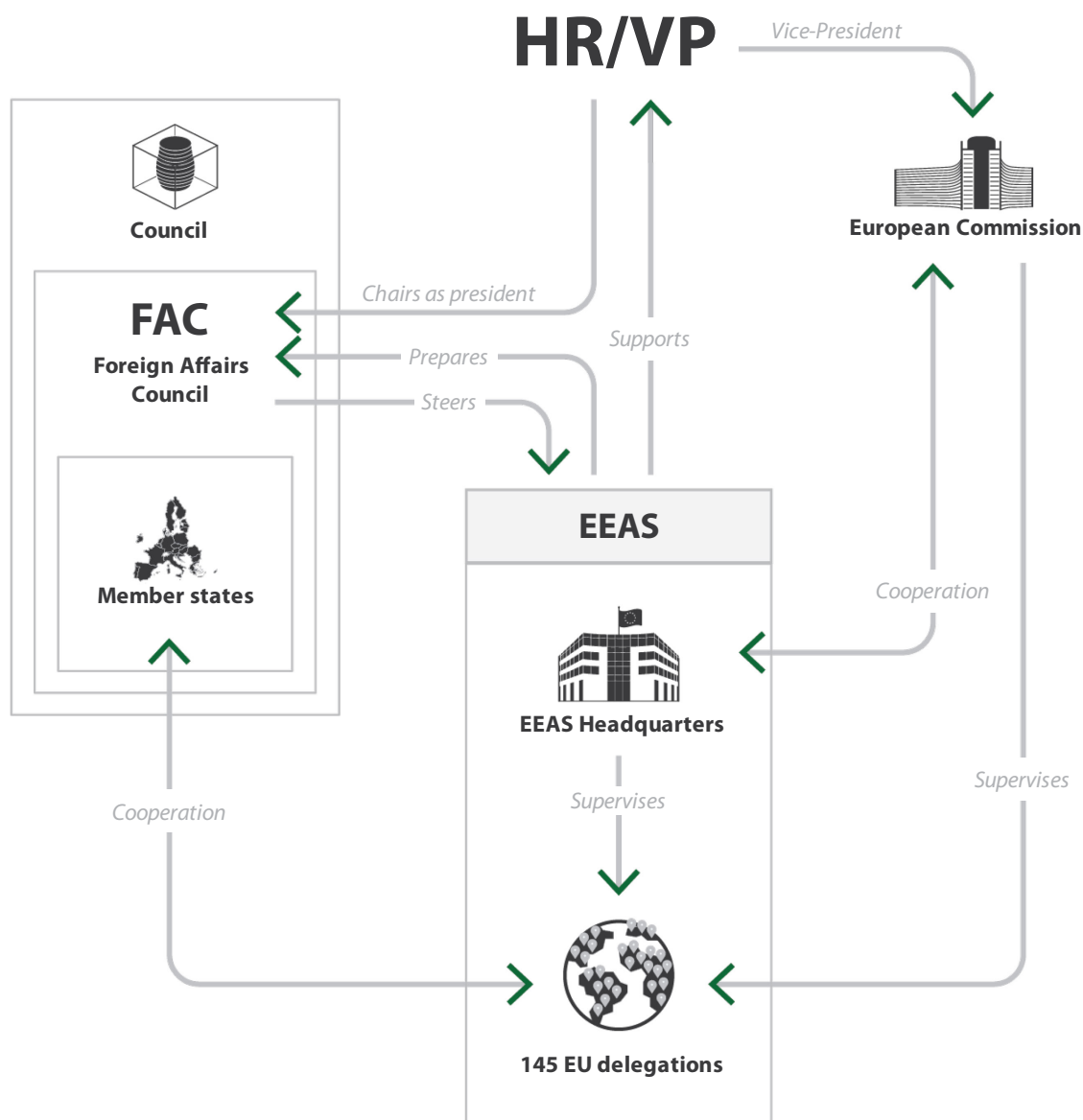
07 Coordination between the EEAS and the Commission involves interaction with multiple Commission DGs and services, primarily the Directorates-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), Trade (DG TRADE), European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), Human Resources and Security (DG HR), Budget (DG BUDG) and the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI).

08 On the basis of strategic guidelines laid down by the European Council (including member states), the FAC steers the EU's external action. Related policies are implemented and followed up, where appropriate, by the HR/VP and the EEAS.

09 Internal coordination is also fundamental⁵, both within EEAS HQ and between EEAS HQ and the 145 EU delegations around the world, as well as with the HR/VP's private office.

⁵ Idem, Article 4(3).

Figure 2 – The EEAS coordinating role



Source: ECA.

The EEAS's resources

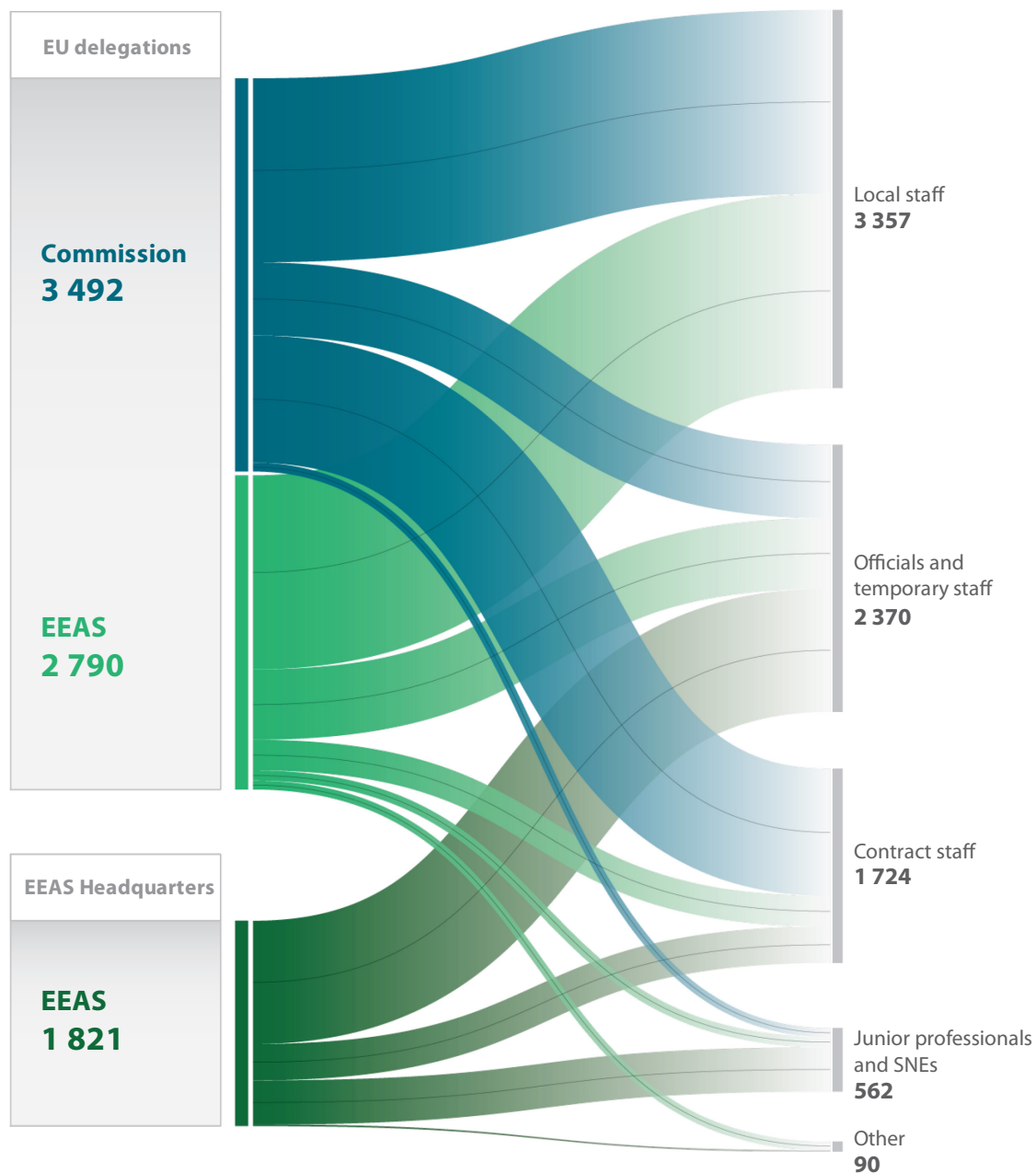
10 The EEAS's administrative budget for 2022 amounted to €787 million⁶. This includes both EEAS HQ and EU delegations, and in addition, the service receives an amount each year from the Commission to cover the administrative costs of

⁶ European External Action Service, [2022 annual activity report](#), p. 58.

Commission staff working in EU delegations. In 2022, this contribution amounted to €241 million.

11 The staff of EEAS HQ and the delegations is both heterogeneous and subject to frequent rotation. It includes officials from the EEAS as well as the Commission, in addition to member state diplomats, local staff, contract and temporary staff, seconded national experts, junior professionals and trainees (see [Figure 3](#)). In EU delegations, while Commission staff members work under the authority of the EU ambassador (the head of the EU delegation), they are hierarchically and administratively attached to their home DGs. This dual organisational positioning necessitates, for example, the use of different working tools and administrative rules.

Figure 3 – EEAS and Commission staffing at EEAS HQ and EU delegations



Source: ECA, based on the 2023 budget.

EEAS reform

12 At the start of 2021, the EEAS Secretary-General launched an internal consultation to review the service and identify challenges and opportunities for the future, including coordination aspects. EEAS staff from both EEAS HQ and EU delegations took part in five workshops organised in February 2021 to reflect on the service's future.

13 These workshops gave rise to the “EEAS@20” project, with seven focus groups generating ideas, identifying key challenges in areas such as working methods, organisational structure and communication, and channelling these into concrete working proposals. Following this, a number of recommendations for reform were issued in March 2021. These are examined later in the report.

Audit scope and approach

14 Recent events, notably Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have brought EU foreign policy and its implementation to the forefront of concerns among the EU member states and institutions. In the context of the [2019 discharge in respect of the EEAS](#), the European Parliament proposed that we conduct a more dedicated review of the service's administrative expenditure and support activities⁷. In 2019 and 2020, the Conference of Committee Chairs of the European Parliament suggested we examine the functioning of the EEAS.

15 We have previously published two other special reports on the EEAS. In 2014, we audited the establishment of the EEAS⁸, touching upon issues relating to the service's coordination with the Commission and the member states. In 2016, we audited the EEAS's management of its buildings⁹.

16 This audit focused on the EEAS's coordinating role in the area of external action, with the aim of assessing whether this coordination was effective and making recommendations for improving coordination within the EEAS and with the Commission and Council. It did not cover other EEAS tasks, such as those related to budgetary operations, consular protection, intelligence activities and sanctions policy.

17 Our main audit question was whether the EEAS's coordination, both internally and with the Commission and Council, was effective. To answer this, we examined the effectiveness of coordination:

- (1) within EEAS HQ (including between the EEAS and the HR/VP's private office);
- (2) between EEAS HQ and EU delegations;
- (3) between the EEAS and the Commission and Council.

18 The audit covered the period from September 2021 (when the EEAS started implementing new working methods and procedures and updated its structure) until April 2023.

⁷ 2020/2149(DEC), 26 March 2021, p. 5.

⁸ Special report [11/2014](#).

⁹ Special report [07/2016](#).

19 We based our observations on the following sources of evidence:

- a review of documentation provided by EEAS HQ and the HR/VP's private office, the Commission and the Council, as well as by the EU delegations visited;
- an analysis of a sample of procedures relating to: Group for External Coordination (EXCO) meetings, interservice consultations, FAC meetings, European Council meetings and international summits; this included different documents, such as meeting agendas and underlying documents, briefings, contribution from other services, and email exchanges.
- several in-person and video meetings with staff from EEAS HQ, DG INTPA and DG NEAR, as well as EU special representatives and chairs of Council working groups and the Political and Security Committee (PSC);
- a survey of all EU ambassadors, with an 82 % response rate (119 EU delegations out of a total of 145);
- field visits to four sampled EU delegations: in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tanzania and Turkmenistan, as well as the EU delegation to the UN in New York;
- Commission Internal Audit Service (IAS) reports.

20 Our selection of EU delegations for field visits was based on the following criteria:

- number of staff;
- geographical location and coverage (i.e. one country, multiple countries or multilateral organisations);
- whether the delegations had been visited recently by the EEAS's inspection service;
- balance between EEAS and Commission staff;
- presence of EU member state embassies in the country.

Observations

EEAS headquarters: an internal review led to improved working methods but weaknesses remain in information management

21 In this section, we assess the EEAS's working methods, procedures and guidelines and the tools available at EEAS HQ, in light of the recent 2021 review. In particular, we assessed whether:

- (1) the EEAS@20 review had an impact on the EEAS's working methods and procedures;
- (2) the EEAS's methods, procedures and guidelines were complete and covered all areas under its remit, and coordination channels provide for involvement of key stakeholders;
- (3) available tools, in particular IT related, were effective in fostering coordination.

Comprehensive review carried out but without a clear action plan or timetable

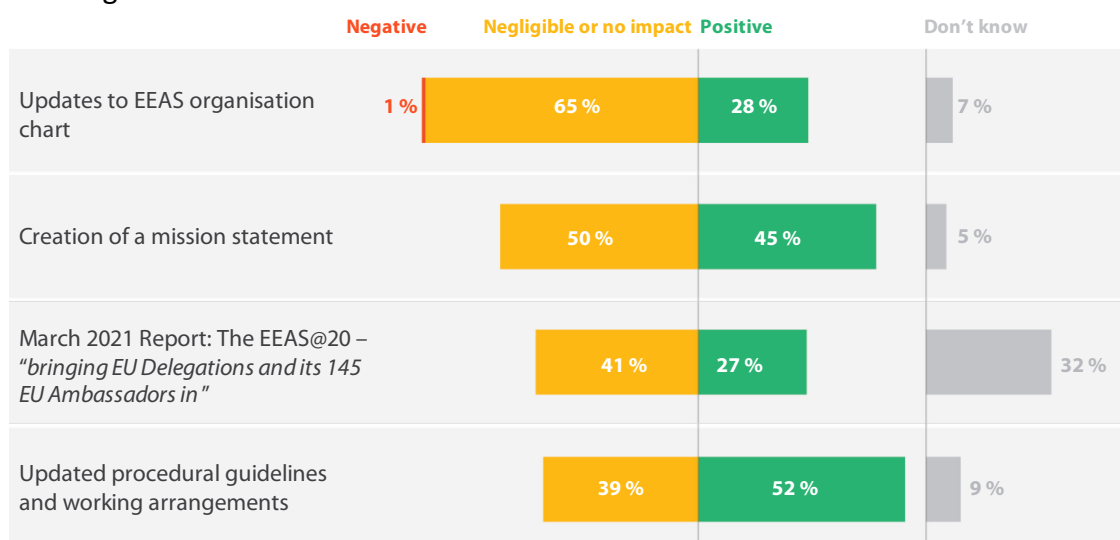
22 On its 10th anniversary, and following the EEAS@20 review exercise launched in early 2021 (see paragraphs [12-13](#)), the EEAS decided to take measures aimed at improving its internal structure and functioning and becoming more effective in its geopolitical role through the EU delegations. Recommendations were included in the reports issued from the focus groups organised in March 2021, but no deadlines or milestones were set out. A number of proposals put forward led to successive changes in the service's structure. For example, the managing directorate in charge of global issues was reorganised to be better aligned with the new Commission and Council strategic priorities (see [Annex I](#)).

23 In April 2022, a new mission statement was presented, and the first steps were taken for a pilot project to create a European Diplomatic Academy, with the goal of building a fully-fledged EU diplomatic corps to promote EU foreign policy and external interests. We consider these were important initiatives to further forge the EEAS's sense of corporate and diplomatic identity.

24 Overall, the EEAS@20 review that took place in 2021 was a comprehensive self-examination exercise which identified crucial areas for improvement and produced valuable recommendations (see paragraphs 22-23). However, the review was not accompanied by a clear, prioritised action plan or an implementation timetable to make staff aware of planned or upcoming changes or the reasoning behind them. For example, the successive changes in the organisation chart were not always clearly presented or explained to staff; nor was the added value behind the decision to change the organisational structure. Our survey found that only 28 % of EU ambassadors considered that the updated structure had a positive impact on the performance of their delegation. In March 2021, an EEAS@20 working group report highlighted proposals for improved relations between EEAS HQ and EU delegations, but 73 % of respondents were either unaware of the report or considered it to have negligible or no impact (see [Figure 4](#)).

Figure 4 – Impact of selected EEAS review actions

Survey question: How have the following actions impacted on the performance of your EU delegation?



Source: ECA survey.

Improved working arrangements and guidelines

25 Following the findings of the EEAS@20 working group on working methods, the EEAS compiled its existing working methods and guidelines and drafted new ones, which are listed in well-structured pages on the EEAS intranet. Working arrangements cover practically all relevant areas involving more than one EEAS department. For example, working arrangements exist that allow EU delegations to contribute to the FAC and be informed of the outcome of the FAC meetings (see also paragraph 97).

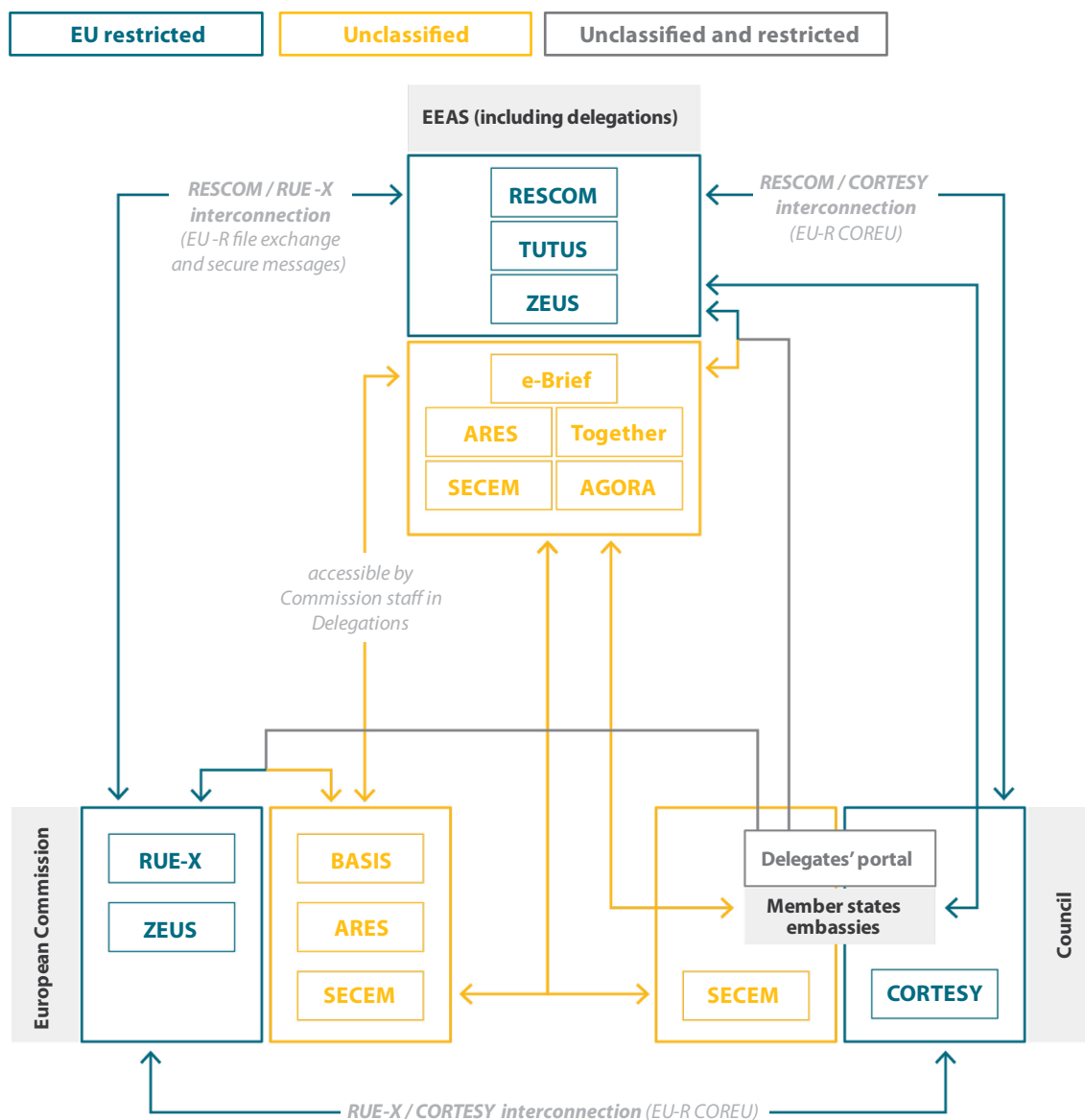
26 For each working method or arrangement, there is a contact point responsible for making updates and preparing training courses for newcomers. Guidelines are comprehensive, but they rarely use flow charts or visual representations to make complex procedures easier to understand. Several working arrangements were updated in 2022 and 2023, including those for relations between the EEAS and the HR/VP's private office. In addition, the EEAS revised the instructions for the preparation and approval of briefings and notes. According to the survey, updated guidelines and working arrangements were welcomed by 52 % of EU ambassadors (see [Figure 4](#)).

27 Coordination within EEAS HQ includes regular meetings between horizontal and thematic directorates, and weekly senior management meetings. It also takes place through political reporting and in the context of preparing policy initiatives, briefings and position papers. Based on our desk review and interviews with EEAS senior management, we found that there is scope to expand participation in such meetings to foster more coordination. For example, senior management meetings are much appreciated for information sharing but do not include EU special representatives, who otherwise fulfil a high-level role in supporting the HR/VP and coordinating EU policy in their respective regions.

Information management tools do not fully support coordination

28 Information management tools, managed by EEAS HQ, play a key role in allowing the EEAS to coordinate its work internally as well as with other institutions (see also [Figure 5](#)). These tools are primarily for collaboration, knowledge and information management, record-keeping and sharing secure information.

Figure 5 – IT tools for intra and inter-institutional coordination



Source: ECA.

Information management still lacking tools for effective collaboration and knowledge management

29 The installation of functional and reliable IT tools is key for good coordination and should be based on a solid information management strategy. The EEAS issued an information management strategy (IMS) in 2019, which identified the organisation's main challenges in terms of tools needed. It stated: "IT tools are not fully adequate for the needs of the EEAS. There are too many, they are often complex to use, impose cumbersome constraints, do not enable efficient search, lack interoperability, and provide semi-efficient functions. Mobile/remote access to these applications is difficult and not user-friendly".

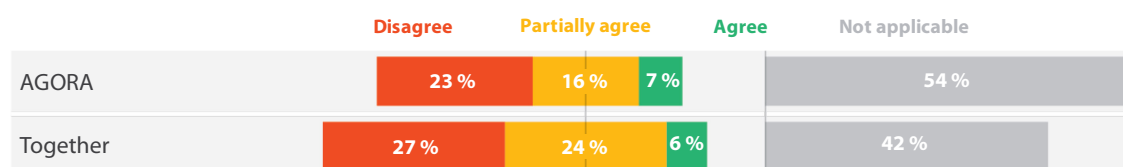
30 The IMS identified the need for three interconnected platforms to manage information: (1) a collaborative platform; (2) a knowledge-management platform and (3) a record-keeping platform. Following our interviews at EEAS HQ and the EU delegations visited, it was clear that the most important IT needs were largely the same as those already indicated in the IMS. We found that two of these three central platforms were still not fully functional at the time of the audit.

31 Firstly, the EEAS identified the need for a **collaborative platform** to bring staff together and allow easier coordination of work involving many different EEAS or Commission departments. This would decrease email traffic and provide an efficient way of working together. We found that the closest things the EEAS had to a collaborative tool were AGORA and “Together”. However, AGORA is mostly used by EU delegations to international organisations to collaborate with member states’ embassies, but not with the Commission. The platform was suspended in early 2022 due to security concerns and replaced by an upgraded version, but this has also continued to cause some difficulties for users, including disruptive software patching.

32 “Together” is more akin to an EEAS networking tool and not used by the Commission, which has its own system. Only 6 % of EU ambassadors considered it to fully meet the needs of their delegation (see [Figure 6](#)). The lack of a shared online document management platform allowing all relevant staff to contribute to a document hampers coordination, both within EEAS HQ and with EU delegations and the Commission (increasing the time and effort needed to produce a final document).

Figure 6 – Survey of EU ambassadors – Collaborative tools

Survey question: To what extent do you agree that the following collaborative tools have been effective to meet the needs of your EU delegation?



Source: ECA.

33 Secondly, **knowledge and information management** was also identified to us as an issue by EU delegations and Council working groups, as well as being listed as an area for improvement in the IMS. They highlighted the difficulties of trying to access relevant information (for example, an overview of EU activities in a certain country, areas of intervention or project information), which is currently dispersed. We

consider that this dispersion of knowledge is a direct risk to institutional memory and efficiency of operations, as well as being a reputational risk.

34 The third platform needed, according to the IMS, was a **record-keeping tool** which would be based on the existing Advanced Records System (ARES). ARES is a document management system used by both the EEAS and the Commission. A powerful search tool based on ARES is essential considering the wealth of information coming from all the corners of the globe. Our survey showed that the vast majority (73 %) of EU ambassadors appreciate ARES. However, our audit found that restrictions on user access rights imposed by the design and security settings of the tool limit the degree to which it can be used as the basis for an efficient corporate search tool.

35 In addition to the platforms, IT tools which identify the right recipients for the right information are important. This is particularly the case in the EEAS, due to the heterogeneity of its staff (see paragraph [11](#)), the fact that some staff are employed for shorter periods (up to 4 or 6 years in the case of contract and temporary staff), and the staff rotation policy in EU delegations. The EU delegations visited expressed concern regarding the lack of centrally updated email distribution lists. One of these EU delegations, as well as the chairs of several Council working groups, told us that distribution lists often contained hundreds of email addresses that were not centrally automated and updated regularly, and that functional mailboxes were not used consistently. Inputting email addresses manually every time introduces the risk of errors and of information not always reaching the relevant people. Respondents to our survey often mentioned issues with distribution lists as a constraint on coordination. Moreover, the IMS also identified the lack of corporate governance for distribution lists.

36 A number of IT tools have been put in place by the EEAS, the Commission or both to facilitate collaboration or coordination between the delegations and related Commission DGs or services. However, limited interoperability options between certain tools and difficulties in using the tools impact such coordination (see paragraphs [42](#) and [98](#)). The situation is complicated by the EEAS's dispersed structure with EU delegations around the world and its close working relationship with the Commission. It is not always easy for the EEAS to replicate the Commission's choice of IT tools, even where adopting a common solution would improve coordination. The EEAS has to take into account different software environments (including those at EU delegations), challenges in cloud computing, different security standards and the varying size of IT departments and their budgets. Nevertheless, the use of separate

systems and software can be confusing for EU delegation staff, who are on occasion forced to use dual profiles for the same administrative tool.

37 All interviewees and EU delegations visited agreed that communication with the Commission in Brussels had benefitted significantly from the increased use of video communication tools introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such tools also enable Commission staff to attend weekly meetings between EU delegations and EEAS HQ. However, the Commission, the EEAS and the delegations have not agreed on a single common video communication tool. They use a variety of tools such as Zoom, Webex, Skype and Teams, which leads to some inefficiencies in organising such meetings and makes it difficult to use collaborative work tools (see also paragraph [31](#)).

Sharing of sensitive and classified information hampered by limitations in IT tools

38 The EEAS handles and produces a significant amount of information that should be handled securely. The EEAS has committed to follow the rules on EU classified information¹⁰. It also produces many reports that are sensitive, though not classified. For these, the EEAS inherited and continues to use a mixture of Commission and Council document classifications. For example, it still uses the “limité” classification, which originates from the Council and is not used by the Commission.

39 This increases the risk of an institution receiving a document with a security classification that it does not recognise, and consequently sending it via the wrong channel. The Commission’s IAS made a similar observation, highlighting important areas for improvement. However, a regulation on information security has been proposed¹¹ to help solve the issue of different security classifications across EU institutions, agencies and other EU bodies.

40 In addition to a harmonised and comprehensive security classification system, it is very important to be able to share information via secure channels and ensure the interoperability of the systems used with those of other EU institutions.

41 In 2020, in the framework of its IMS, the EEAS developed its own internal IT solution, RESCOM, for drafting, storing, collaborating on and sending EU Restricted information. This was instead of using the Commission’s RUE system, which was being discontinued. However, according to our interlocutors in EU delegations, RESCOM can

¹⁰ Decision on the security rules for the EEAS, [ADMIN\(2017\) 10](#).

¹¹ Proposal for a Regulation on information security in the institutions, bodies, offices and agencies of the Union, [COM\(2022\) 119](#).

be cumbersome to use and does not always meet their needs. One of the EU delegations visited did not have a RESCOM computer for many years and only received one (for the entire delegation) shortly before our audit. It was unusable due to the inadequate local internet connection available to the EU delegation. Another EU delegation visited had experienced issues with the transition from RUE to RESCOM. We found that due to these issues, its use remained limited, which raises the risk of classified information being shared through less secure channels. In reply to our survey, 39 % of EU ambassadors partially agreed that RESCOM was effective, whereas only 20 % of EU ambassadors agreed that RESCOM fully met their needs (see [Box 1](#) and [Figure 7](#)).

Box 1

IT tools for secure communication – Views from the EU delegations' ambassadors

As regards secure communication, several EU ambassadors, while recognising the efforts of EEAS IT departments in maintaining the systems, expressed the opinion that the current IT solutions were not sustainable in the long term. One ambassador saw the need for a comprehensive review of existing resources and infrastructure, and for sufficient funds to be allocated to upgrade and maintain the systems.

Several ambassadors complained that the EEAS's system for secure communication, RESCOM, though secure, was too heavy and cumbersome for the Internet speeds available in their countries. This made it too slow and ineffective to use, even for straightforward tasks.

One ambassador stated that while technical guidance on the use of RESCOM had been provided, there had been no practical guidance and there was no motivation to use it for reporting. As a result, this ambassador had instead been using SECCEM (see paragraph 43) which, though less secure than RESCOM, was practical and easy to use.

Another ambassador expressed regret that RESCOM was not available to most staff. They recommended providing more widespread access to RESCOM and creating a better culture of security, without any possibility of accessing emails via private mobile devices. They also considered that delegations should also have tools to send documents classified as "EU confidential" or "EU secret".

Source: ECA survey.

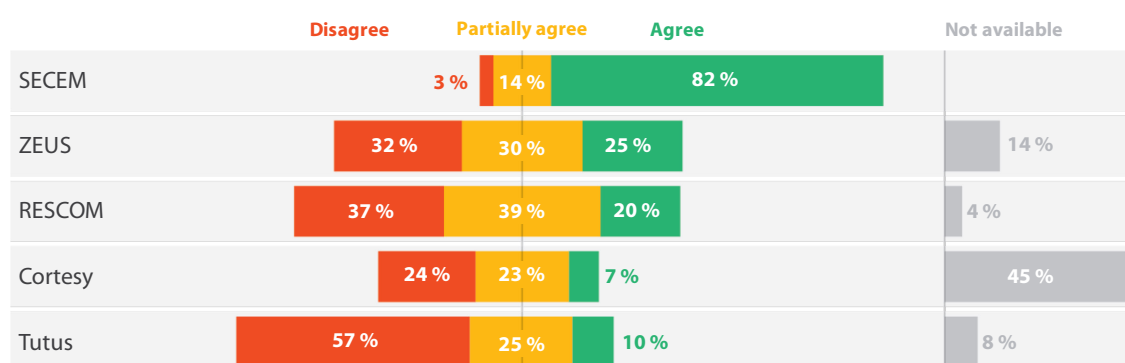
42 Sharing information securely is a key concern for EU delegations. Only 53 % of respondents to our survey indicated they had IT tools suitable for sharing documents

securely with Commission DGs or services. Some of the IT tools EU delegations currently use for sharing information securely with member states present in the same country are either too complex or not user-friendly and have therefore not been widely adopted. Others have suffered from security issues and still do not cover users' needs (see paragraph 31). For example, the ZEUS encryption software for secure transmission of classified documents was reported to be too cumbersome by three of the EU delegations we visited. This restricted its use by both them and member states embassies, affecting both the security of communication and their ability to work efficiently on a single digital document (thus forcing them to sometimes print and share paper copies).

43 In our survey, 32 % and 57 % of EU delegations respectively considered ZEUS and Tutus (secure smartphones using RESCOM) to be ineffective in meeting their needs (see Figure 7). Our survey also asked EU ambassadors about SECEM (a system for sharing sensitive information by email used by the EEAS and the Commission) and Cortesy (a system for encrypted communication between national foreign ministries, the EEAS, the Council and the Commission). They rated SECEM as effective. Only 7 % of EU ambassadors fully agreed that Cortesy was an effective tool (see Figure 7).

Figure 7 – Effectiveness of EU delegations' IT tools for secure communication

Survey question: To what extent do you agree that the following tools for sharing of secure information have been effective to meet the needs of your EU delegation?



Source: ECA survey.

44 Due to the difficulties reported by several EU delegations in using ZEUS, Tutus or AGORA, some of them, including three of the four visited, have resorted to using commercially available instant messaging services. However, these applications are not provided by EU institutions, and it is EEAS policy not to allow the use of commercially available instant messaging services to exchange professional information. The EEAS instead favours the use of an alternative secure messaging service, "Signal".

The EEAS and EU delegations: frequent communication fosters coordination but delegations miss feedback from EEAS HQ on planning and political reporting

45 We examined the mechanisms in place for coordination between EEAS headquarters and the EU delegations, and particularly whether:

- (1) the EEAS had set up appropriate internal working arrangements and structures to foster coordination with EU delegations; and
- (2) these were being used effectively.

High-level oversight is backed by good bilateral communication between EEAS HQ and the EU delegations

EUDEL is a useful forum for coordination at delegation level

46 At EU delegations, the coordination and management of EEAS and Commission staff is driven by an advisory body known as EUDEL, which was established in 2012 by a joint decision of the Commission and the HR/VP¹² and can issue recommendations to either institution. It comprises one director from each of the EEAS), DG INTPA, the Secretariat-General, DG BUDG and DG HR.

47 EUDEL aims to ensure cooperation and mutual consultation between the EEAS and the relevant Commission DGs and services on all issues relating to the management of EU delegations. According to the EEAS, it serves as a forum for exchanging information on matters of mutual interest, notably in relation to resource management and the ability of EU delegations to adapt swiftly to political priorities or unforeseen situations. Its meeting agendas also include a standing point concerning coordination on IT matters. Its minutes show that it fosters the exchange of information and ideas between the EEAS and Commission DGs and services. For example, there were discussions on preparing the 2022 workload assessment (see also paragraph 85), followed up in subsequent meetings.

¹² Joint Decision on Cooperation Mechanisms concerning the Management of Delegations of the European Union ([JOIN/2012/0008](#)).

EEAS HQ and EU delegations maintain frequent communication

48 In October 2021, the EEAS's Secretary-General acknowledged that coordination between EEAS HQ and EU delegations should be strengthened and issued "Guidelines for improved policy interaction between the EU Delegations and Headquarters". The guidelines highlighted the need for regular country meetings between EEAS HQ and EU delegations, and inviting Commission DGs and services where appropriate.

49 Each EU delegation is allocated a desk officer at EEAS HQ. We found that they maintained frequent communication, with delegation staff reporting that desk officers were in almost daily contact. The quality of these exchanges improved as a result of the increased uptake of videoconferencing tools triggered by the COVID-19 crisis (see paragraph 37).

Delegations receive clear instructions from EEAS HQ but planning is hampered by EEAS HQ delays and lack of feedback

Mission letters provide useful guidance but had not been issued to some EU ambassadors

50 Mission letters are a key document providing the framework for the EU delegations' work. They should be addressed to EU ambassadors at the beginning of their mandate and set out how and when EU objectives are expected to be achieved in their country of appointment. They also provide the framework on which EU ambassadors can base their annual management plans (AMPs). Most respondents to our survey also considered them a useful guide to direct the actions of EU delegations (around 60 % agreed and 37 % partially agreed, whereas fewer than 4 % disagreed). However, not all current EU ambassadors had received mission letters for their mandate. Of the four EU delegations visited, one had not received a mission letter, and our survey of EU ambassadors also showed that 7 % of respondents had not been issued with one for their mandate.

Disconnect between EEAS HQ and EU delegations on annual planning

51 AMPs are established for the EEAS as a whole (by EEAS HQ) as well as individually by each EU delegation. These plans should set out the main activities for the year and explain how these will contribute to the overall EEAS and Commission objectives. The need for EU delegations' contribution to policy planning is also included in the guidelines for improved policy interaction between the EEAS HQ and EU delegations.

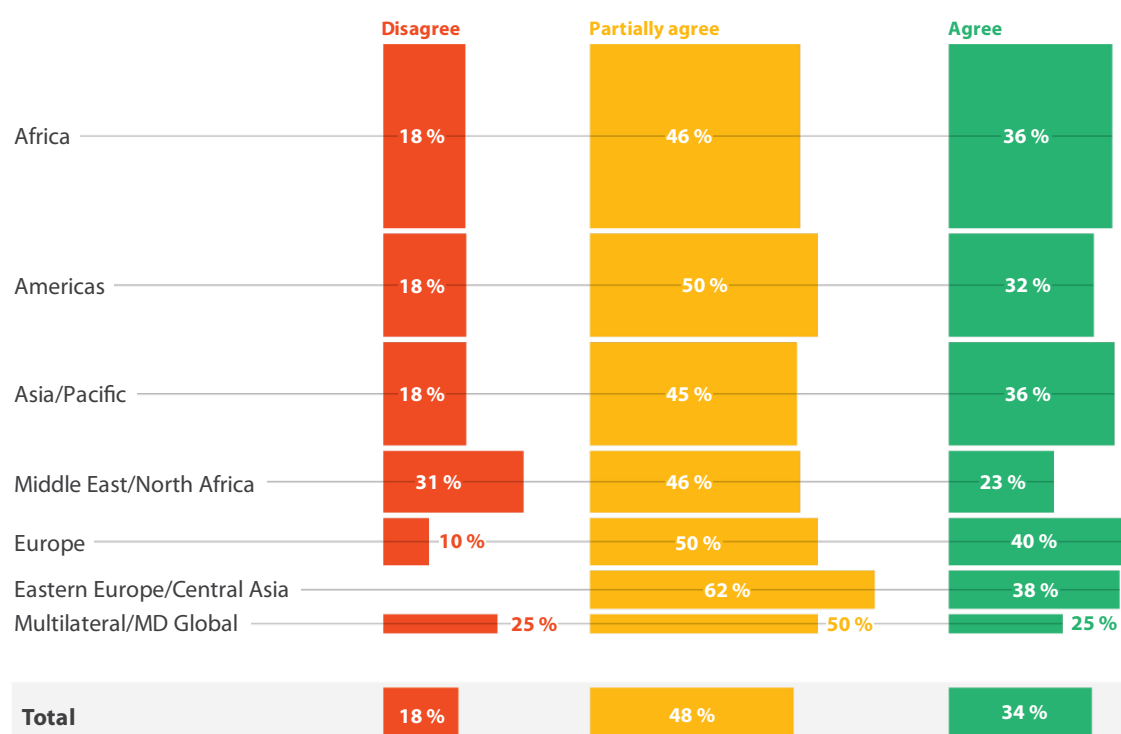
52 We found that the EEAS had an established procedure for EU delegations to prepare their AMPs, but with unpredictable timing that EU delegations cannot anticipate. For the last three exercises, 2021 to 2023, EEAS HQ sent updated templates and instructions between October and February, and with deadlines of between 4 and 8 weeks. For example, the 2023 AMP template was sent to EU delegations on 16 December 2022, with a deadline for submission of 27 January 2023, which some EU ambassadors considered to be too late.

53 Varying instructions for EU delegations on how to formulate their AMPs were issued between 2021 and 2023. In 2022 and 2023, delegations were asked to link their submissions to that year's EEAS HQ AMP. However, the late issuing of the EEAS HQ AMPs, on 7 July 2022 (six months after the start of the year) and 8 March 2023 (two months too late) respectively, meant that it was never possible in practice for delegations to base their submissions on the overall EEAS HQ AMP.

54 Views among the EU delegations visited were divided as to whether AMPs are a useful planning document in their current form, although they generally agreed, as did most survey respondents, that AMPs could play an important planning role for EU delegations (see [Figure 8](#)). In this context, DG INTPA has recently decided that it will no longer contribute to the EU delegations' AMPs. This was one of the DG's 43 simplification measures designed to reduce workload, avoid duplication between Commission and EEAS HQs and delegations and increase effectiveness. Considering that many EU delegations focus heavily on DG INTPA-related programmes and assistance, the lack of input on this DG's policy objectives makes AMPs less useful. This was also highlighted by the two of the EU delegations visited. It also limits the ability to subsequently assess the achievement of DG INTPA's objectives in each EU delegation.

Figure 8 – Usefulness of annual management plans (AMP)

Survey question: To what extent do you agree with the statement “Compiling the AMP is a useful exercise”?

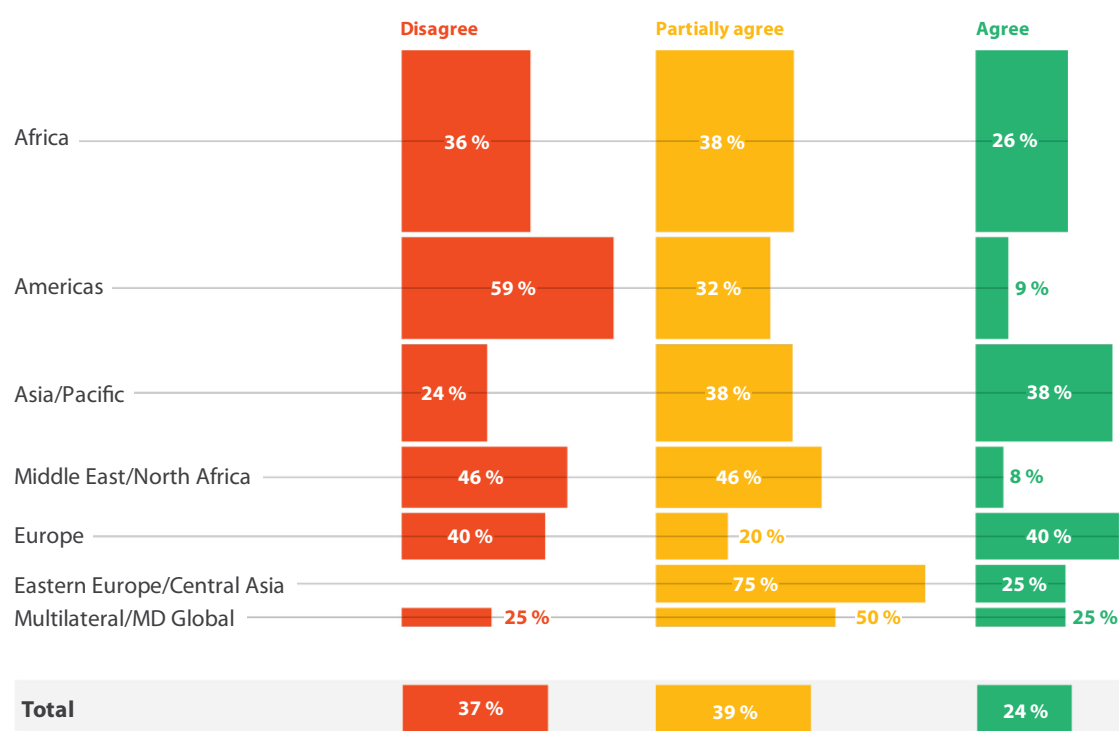


Source: ECA survey.

55 One reason why some of the EU delegations visited expressed doubts that AMPs were a useful exercise was the lack of feedback from EEAS HQ, which caused uncertainty as to whether they were on the right track. In fact, there are no working arrangements in place for EEAS HQ to provide delegations with feedback on their submitted AMPs. More than one third of the EU ambassadors surveyed replied that they had not received any type of feedback on their AMPs, with 39 % having received some feedback and only 24 % fully agreeing that they had received feedback. These figures varied between regions (see [Figure 9](#)). We found a positive correlation between the receipt of feedback and perceived usefulness of the AMP exercise.

Figure 9 – EEAS HQ feedback on EU delegations' AMPs

Survey question: To what extent do you agree with the statement “The EU delegation received feedback from EEAS HQ on the 2022 AMP”?



Source: ECA survey.

56 The situation has improved, but not drastically, when compared with a survey carried out by EEAS HQ itself in 2021. The [EEAS's 2020 annual activity report](#) stated that despite efforts to improve the feedback from EEAS HQ to delegations regarding their AMPs, the proportion of EU delegations declaring that they had not received feedback on their AMP rose from 47.1 % in 2019 to 54.6 % in 2020.

Delegations miss feedback on their political reporting

57 Political reporting is a key product which takes the form of written communications from the EU delegations to EEAS HQ on matters of interest to the service (political issues, security, foreign policy, regional interests, social and economic development, etc.). There are three types of political reports:

- reports from EU ambassadors known as head-of-delegation reports (the most common type),
- special reports (often linked to a high-level meeting of the HR/VP or Secretary-General),

- o and head-of-mission reports (these are often drafted in preparation for Council working group discussions and are sent collectively from the EU ambassadors and EU member states' ambassadors, also referred to as "heads of mission").

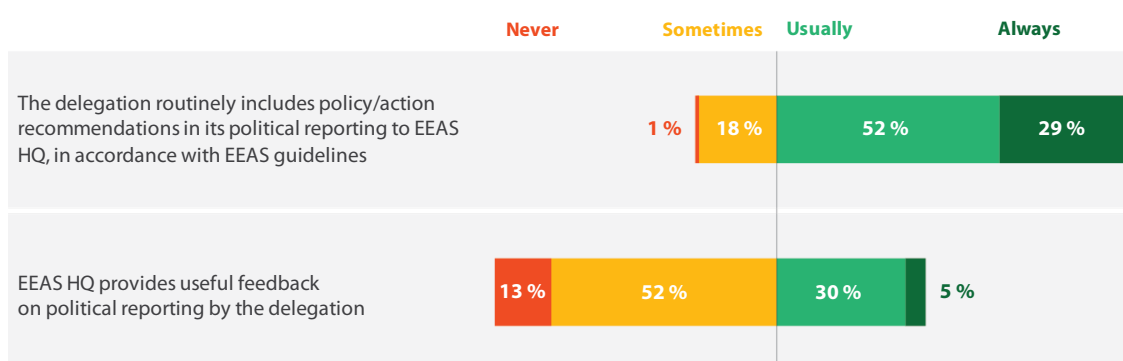
58 EU delegations, through their regular political reporting (usually head-of-delegation reports) to EEAS HQ, contribute to formulating EU foreign policy. The guidelines on political reporting also include information on the use of templates and on the reports' recipients, frequency, content and structure.

59 More specifically, the guidelines specify: "Political reporting should be sufficiently frequent to cover developments in a timely manner. Preference should be given to shorter but more frequent reporting." All but one of the EU delegations visited provided EEAS HQ with regular political reporting, mostly weekly or monthly. All EU delegations visited shared reports with neighbouring EU delegations, in line with the guidelines issued by the EEAS Secretary-General.

60 Additionally, the guidelines state: "Reports should contain recommendations to HQ for possible action. Delegations may present various policy options, while recommending one of them." However, we found that for the EU delegations visited, reports did not consistently include conclusions or recommendations for EEAS HQ. Only 29 % of respondents to our survey reported that they always include policy or action recommendations for EEAS HQ in their reports (see [Figure 10](#)).

Figure 10 – Political reporting

Survey question: To what extent does the following statements apply?



Source: ECA survey.

61 Coordination related to head-of-mission reports is sometimes complicated by the fact that not all embassies are present on the ground. Therefore, IT tools are key in order to be able to securely share head-of-mission reports with both resident and non-resident ambassadors. However, the available tool (ZEUS) is not often used (see paragraphs [42](#) and [44](#)).

62 We found that there was no standardised approach to the provision of feedback by HQ, despite the EEAS having issued guidelines in October 2021 on improving this issue. None of the four EU delegations visited received direct feedback on the format and substance of head-of-delegation or head-of-mission reports. Our survey showed that 65 % of respondents never, or only sometimes, received feedback on their political reporting (see [Figure 10](#)). The lack of feedback on political reporting was one of the issues most frequently mentioned by respondents to our survey (see [Box 2](#)).

Box 2

Comments from EU ambassadors on feedback

One ambassador expressed the opinion that reporting should always receive written feedback, as a coordination instrument. We also received comments from ambassadors who had never received feedback.

Another respondent commented that reporting on political matters was often a “one-way street”, with rarely any discussion on content. In one ambassador’s experience, only indirect feedback was provided, such as when reports were used for statements or Council working group meetings.

The view was also expressed that reporting should be improved by both EU delegations and HQ, and be the subject of a thorough internal review, since standardisation was currently lacking.

Source: ECA survey.

63 In addition to political reporting, the EU delegations have other extensive reporting requirements to fulfil towards both EEAS HQ and the Commission, such as the Information and Communication annual report and the Human Rights reports. In September 2022, recognising the burden that reporting placed on the EU delegations, EEAS HQ launched an exercise to map these reporting requirements in order to review and simplify them. However, the result of the mapping exercise was not complete, since it did not include all regions or reports. Moreover, it did not include any recommendations for simplifying the requirements. The mapping exercise also failed to include requirements for reporting to the Commission.

Démarches are guided by clear instructions and carried out on time

64 EU delegations are asked to carry out démarches (relatively high-level requests for formal diplomatic representations of official views to other governments or international organisations) or outreach requests from EEAS or the Commission.

During our visits to four EU delegations, we received feedback that EEAS instructions were clear. We found that démarches were carried out on time, where the host countries' authorities cooperated. However, one EU delegation did not always provide the issuing HQ with feedback on the démarches delivered, despite this being required by the EEAS guidelines.

65 Coordination efforts are particularly relevant in the multilateral context, for example when delivering démarches prior to voting at the UN. In this case, diplomatic outreach work is normally split among member states (a practice known as “burden sharing”), with support and coordination from an EU delegation to an international organisation. According to some member state embassies we met during our audit visits, this practice made the EU more effective than member states and EU delegations working autonomously, as they had prior to the Treaty of Lisbon. For example, in the context of voting at the UN General Assembly on a number of resolutions relating to the war in Ukraine, burden sharing was a successful way of rallying support within tight deadlines.

EEAS coordination with the Commission and the Council is working effectively despite challenges in EU delegations

66 In this section, we assess the mechanisms for higher-level and operational coordination between the EEAS and the Commission and the Council.

Coordination with the Commission is managed well but operational challenges exist in EU delegations

67 The EEAS coordinates with the Commission at various levels, from collegial high-level, through interservice consultation, down to individual staff in EU delegations. We assessed whether:

- (1) the existing high-level coordination mechanisms, in particular the high-level Group for External Coordination (EXCO)¹³ and the Commissioners' Group on a Stronger Europe in the world (CGSE), provided for effective coordination between the EEAS and the Commission;
- (2) coordination with the Commission through interservice consultations was effective;

¹³ Communication: The Working Methods of the European Commission, 1.12.2019, [P\(2019\) 2](#).

- (3) coordination between the EEAS and the Commission within EU delegations was effective.

EXCO enhances coordination between EEAS and Commission, but CGSE is no longer active

68 EXCO was set up in 2019 under the working methods of the incoming von der Leyen Commission¹⁴, with the aim of achieving full political coordination and consistency on external action matters (see *Annex II*). It is a collegial preparatory body co-chaired by the Commission President’s diplomatic adviser and by the deputy head of the HR/VP’s private office and brings together, on a weekly basis, representatives of all Commissioners’ private offices. The EXCO secretariat is provided by the European Commission.

69 Guidelines for the group – originally drawn up in 2020 and updated in the first quarter of 2023 – clarify its role and the process its activities should follow. Like other services in EXCO, the EEAS prepares targeted two-page notes to address topics on the EXCO agenda. EXCO is intended as a forum for swiftly testing general support for an initiative before the relevant Commissioner’s private office puts forward a given proposal. As a “core service”, the EEAS is consulted on all EXCO notes.

70 We interviewed chairs of Council working groups and the chair of the Political and Security Committee, who were generally positive about the role of EXCO. They considered that it helped to avoid misunderstandings between DGs and appreciated the role played by the EXCO coordinator. The Commission officials we interviewed also considered that EXCO improved coordination between the EEAS and the Commission.

71 We examined a sample of documents from two EXCO meetings, which took place on 23 February 2022 and 13 July 2022, and found that the documents complied with the guidelines and templates issued. We consider that the regular and intense collaboration offered by EXCO has enhanced the relationship between the Commission and the EEAS.

72 The Commissioners’ Group on a Stronger Europe in the World (CGSE), created in 2019, is one of the six Commissioners’ groups on the six headline ambitions of the President’s political guidelines; it is coordinated by the HR/VP and should meet at least

¹⁴ Ibid.

every three months¹⁵. It is a forum for strategic discussions at Commissioners' level, aiming to contribute to coherent policy-making by providing political steering to EEAS and Commission departments.

73 Despite 2023 guidance¹⁶ indicating the intention to meet at least every six months, the CGSE is effectively inactive. It did not meet during the period covered by our audit, last convening in 2020 before the start of the COVID-19 lockdown. Given the CGSE's sensitive nature, a switch to an online format was considered and tested in 2021, but ultimately not pursued.

The EEAS plays an active role in interservice consultation

74 In order to maintain transparency and consistency throughout the decision-making process, all proposed laws or policies to be adopted by the College of Commissioners, as well as staff working documents, should undergo interservice consultation (ISC). The lead DG or service (i.e. the one proposing the new law or policy) must seek the formal opinion of all DGs and services (including the EEAS) that have a specific interest in the substance of the proposal. Since the EEAS assists the HR/VP in his/her capacity as Vice-President of the Commission, it can also take the lead in proposing Commission legal acts or policies, following Commission rules and procedures.

75 When the EEAS is consulted, during an ISC, on a proposal with an external component or possible external impact, the service's legislative coordinators are notified through a shared platform. They assign the ISC to the appropriate EEAS divisions, which then analyse the documents and formulate an opinion and response. In 2022, the EEAS was consulted on 2 059 out of a total of 9 070 ISCs. EEAS legislative coordinators also carry out regular searches and monitoring to check for any ISCs on which the EEAS should have been consulted but was not, in order to rectify the situation. Since 2018, on average, around 50 such cases have been identified each year. In general, the EEAS is actively involved in ISCs and responds appropriately.

¹⁵ Decision of the President of the European Commission of 1 December 2019 on the creation of Commissioners' Groups, P (2019) 4.

¹⁶ Internal working arrangements between the EEAS and the HR/VP Cabinet, 2023.

Staff flexibility and sense of unity remain a challenge in EU delegations

76 In our 2014 special report on the establishment of the EEAS¹⁷, we noted that the service was facing difficulties in staffing critical functions with the resources transferred to it. Almost 10 years later, the EEAS is still facing staffing challenges, especially at EU delegations. The EEAS's 2022 annual activity report highlighted chronic understaffing and difficulty recruiting certain staff profiles as risks to business continuity. In our survey, several EU ambassadors highlighted the issue of understaffing, especially in their political sections.

77 Even though priorities and policies can shift over time (sometimes forced by unexpected events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine), the organisational structure at EU delegations remains broadly unchanged. According to interviews held, this can lead many delegations to rely on a small number of staff covering ever-growing policy areas (such as climate, energy, trade, cybersecurity or space). A recurrent theme in our interviews at both the Commission and EEAS in Brussels, and in EU delegations, was that all EU policies now had a significant external dimension and that this needed to be covered by appropriate staffing levels.

78 As explained in paragraph 11, significant numbers of Commission personnel are posted in EU delegations, alongside EEAS staff. Since they may be entrusted with meeting objectives set by their home institution, harmonious and efficient cooperation between all staff in EU delegations is essential for effective coordination.

79 The 2019 Commission decision on the management of Commission resources in EU delegations¹⁸ sets out general principles on flexibility for Commission staff in EU delegations. It stipulates that staff can, at the ambassadors' request, spend up to 20 % of their time on tasks related to areas under the responsibility of other DGs. In addition, a 2012 joint decision between the European Commission and the High Representative¹⁹ allows Commission staff to contribute to other work of the delegation, subject to certain constraints and, for longer periods, with the agreement of the home DG.

80 EEAS staff are also able to work on Commission files, according to a Commission-EEAS internal note on staff flexibility sent to heads of delegation in 2016. Bilateral

¹⁷ Special report 11/2014.

¹⁸ C(2019) 8634.

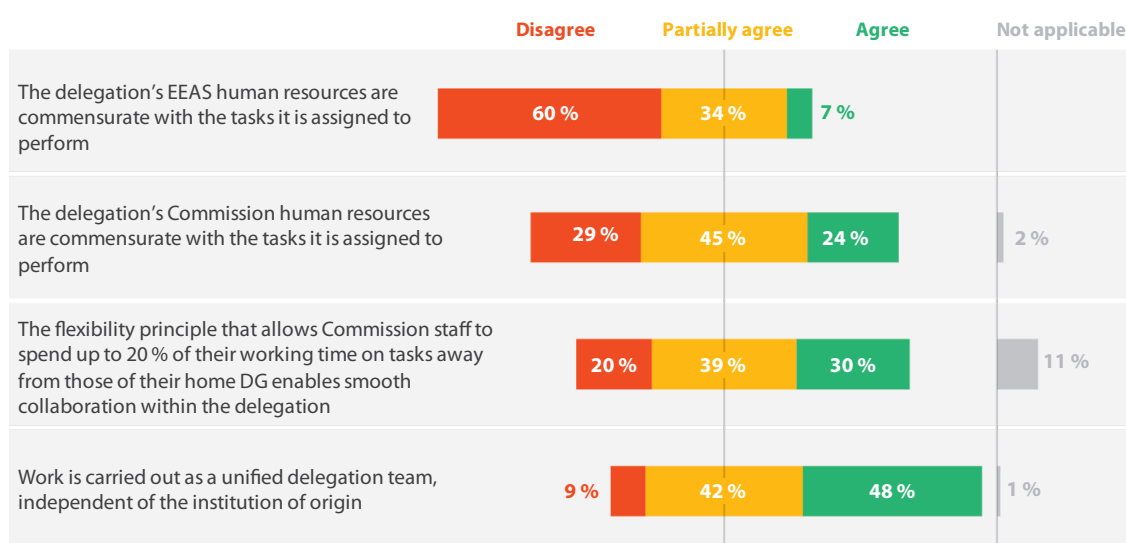
¹⁹ Article 6, (JOIN/2012/0008).

arrangements such as the 2011 agreement between the EEAS and DG INTPA (formerly DG DEVCO) also set out principles on flexibility in the delegations.

81 In our survey of EU ambassadors, 69 % of respondents either fully or partially agreed that the “20 % flexibility” principle enabled smooth collaboration within their EU delegation (see [Figure 11](#)).

Figure 11 – Survey of EU ambassadors – Human resources

Survey question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



Source: ECA survey.

82 A significant minority of respondents did not agree that the flexibility principle was helpful. The most frequent comments received were that the principle did not afford sufficient flexibility, especially in small EU delegations, and that it afforded less flexibility to contract staff, who account for most Commission staff at delegations. In our interviews, DG INTPA also underlined the importance of using contract staff for their designated tasks, and that to do otherwise would constitute misuse of approved budget appropriations.

83 In the EU delegations visited, EU ambassadors, as heads of delegation, took responsibility for promoting a unified delegation, for including both Commission and EEAS staff in reporting, and for ensuring good internal coordination meetings and cooperation. According to the EU ambassadors interviewed, difficulties relating to IT tools and budget lines did not pose insurmountable obstacles to unity within EU delegations. However, in two of the delegations visited, due to limited space, some staff were situated on a separate floor of the building, accessible only via another secured member state embassy, which risked creating a “silo mentality”.

84 Our survey results in this respect were more mixed, however. While 48 % of EU ambassadors agreed that their staff worked as a unified delegation, 42 % only partially agreed and 9 % disagreed (see [Figure 11](#) and [Box 3](#)).

Box 3

Comments from ambassadors on EU delegation unity

Several EU ambassadors reported the need to continue working towards a “one EU delegation” approach, which would require steering and coordination from both the Commission and EEAS HQs. One stated that there should be a “one HQ” policy if the aim is a “one EU delegation” policy.

Some ambassadors stated that, in order to have “one EU delegation”, staff appraisals should be done by the ambassador rather than HQ. Another ambassador reported that the quality of coordination depended on the personnel involved and that, while things generally still worked in their EU delegation, the silo mentality was still apparent, leading to occasional communication issues.

Source: ECA survey.

85 In 2022, the Commission and the EEAS carried out an assessment of the Commission’s workload in EU delegations. It found that, in a context of stable resources, the staff allocation to the various policy areas was generally fit for purpose and enabled the EU to deliver on its geopolitical priorities.

86 The workload assessment of Commission staff in EU delegations revealed the need for targeted adjustments to staffing levels in order to address workload imbalances across the EU delegation network and reflect recent political developments. Several staff transfers have therefore been proposed. The assessment also showed that further operational and financial regionalisation could benefit the network by fostering economies of scale and developing specialist expertise. It thus proposed either reinforcing existing regional structures (for example in Latin America and the Caribbean) or developing new ones (particularly in Africa). The workload assessment also showed increased demand for policy expertise in EU delegations, and that internal policy DGs’ allocation of staff resources to EU delegations was not always commensurate with the priority level of their policy area.

87 Our interviews in EU delegations indicated a pattern of relative understaffing in “political, press and information” sections, which are largely composed of EEAS staff. This is backed up by our survey of EU ambassadors, only 7 % of whom agreed that their

EU delegation had sufficient EEAS human resources for its tasks. One quarter agreed that their EU delegation had sufficient Commission staff for its tasks, with another 45 % partially agreeing (see [Figure 11](#)).

Coordination with the Council is well established but there is no common briefing tool

88 The Treaty on European Union requires the High Representative to take part in the work of the European Council²⁰. The Council's rules of procedure²¹ stipulate that while meetings are organised and steered by the President of the European Council, the High Representative should also attend in an external relations capacity. The EEAS, in its supporting role, should therefore contribute to European Council meetings where necessary. The treaty requires the High Representative to chair FAC meetings, whose main role is to ensure the unity, consistency and effectiveness of the EU's external action. The EEAS therefore plays a central role in the preparation of FAC meetings. We assessed the effectiveness of the EEAS's coordination:

- (1) in the context of its contributions to the preparation of European Council meetings, including summits with non-EU countries and regional organisations;
- (2) in preparation for FAC meetings.

89 We examined the preparatory documents to which the EEAS contributed for two specific European Council meetings²² and two summits²³. We also reviewed the EEAS's coordinating role in the preparation of two FAC meetings²⁴.

Coordination on European Council meetings and summits works well

90 The EEAS's Policy Coordination Division (SG.COORD) coordinates the briefings that the EEAS prepares for meetings of the Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the European Union (COREPER), in close cooperation with the Presidency and the General Secretariat of the

²⁰ Article 15 of the [Treaty on European Union](#).

²¹ [European Council Decision of 1 December 2009](#).

²² Meetings of [24 February 2022](#) and [23-24 June 2022](#).

²³ The [EU-Western Balkans summit on 6 October 2021](#) and the [EU-African Union summit on 17-18 February 2022](#).

²⁴ FAC meetings on [19 November 2021](#) and on [18 July 2022](#).

Council. It also prepares the High Representative's briefings for meetings of the European Council itself, in line with the established procedures for Council work.

91 The extraordinary meeting on 24 February 2022 was organised at very short notice due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Consequently, the European Council did not follow normal preparation procedures (there was no COREPER discussion on the annotated draft agenda, for example). Nevertheless, it consulted Commission DGs and included their input in the briefing. The security of the information shared was principally ensured by sending documents through the Council's COREU (*CORespondance EUropéenne*) secure communication network. By contrast, the European Council meeting held on 23-24 June 2022 was a standard meeting. In this case, all steps in the usual procedure were followed, and we did not identify any gaps.

92 The procedure for coordination in the organisation of summits is included in the [vademecum](#) (handbook) on external action²⁵. It is also described in the "best practice" guidance available on the EEAS intranet, which clearly defines the role of the EEAS. However, there are no interinstitutional guidelines. As from 2023, the preparation of summits is also covered by the working arrangements between the EEAS and the HR/VP's private office. The EEAS is in charge of the overall coordination, negotiation of joint statements and providing the briefing files.

93 The documents provided for the EU-Western Balkans summit indicate good institutional coordination, without any gaps in information sharing. However, there was no evidence of a common briefing book having been prepared for the summit, as required by the vademecum. Three briefings were prepared: by the EEAS for the HR/VP, and one each by the Commission and European Council for their respective Presidents. The briefings were subject to consultation and input from the other institutions.

94 The evidence we received on the preparation of the EU-African Union summit also showed overall compliance with the EEAS's internal guidelines. Like the EU-Western Balkans summit, the African Union summit had three different briefings, which had been subject to cross-consultation between the three institutions and were aligned.

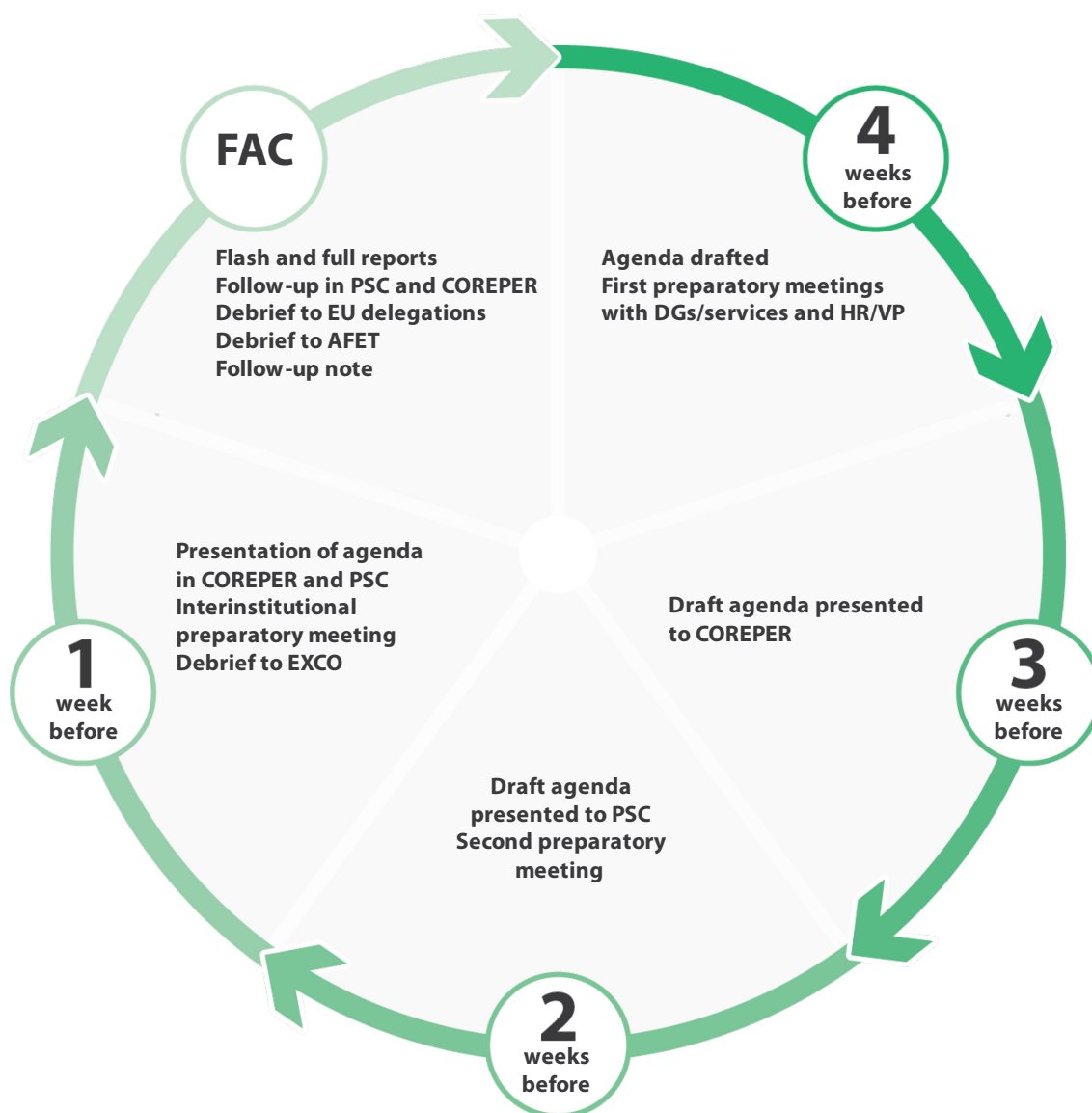
²⁵ Vademecum on the external action of the EU, [SEC\(2011\)881/3](#).

Foreign Affairs Council meetings are prepared well but lack a common briefing tool

95 Because FAC meetings are chaired by the High Representative, the EEAS plays a central role in their preparation. The FAC meetings are prepared based on the Council's rules of procedure, the EEAS guidelines for the preparation of FAC meetings and working arrangements between the EEAS and the HR/VP's private office.

96 Preparation for FAC meetings is carried out by the EEAS Council team within SG.COORD and follows a 4-week cycle (see [Figure 12](#)). We found that the team coordinated closely with the HR/VP's private office, EEAS senior management, and relevant departments and divisions. Coordination with member states takes place through COREPER, the Council working group chairs and the Political and Security Committee (PSC), whose chair and secretariat are provided by the EEAS. Such coordination has been strengthened in recent years by, among other things, incorporating staff from Council preparatory bodies into SG.COORD. The leaders of these two bodies, as well as staff in the Council teams, are in constant contact with the General Secretariat of the Council, the Presidency and member states. Moreover, the head of SG.COORD reports directly to the EEAS Secretary-General.

Figure 12 – Preparation of the Foreign Affairs Council meetings



Source: ECA.

97 According to the guidelines, EU delegations can contribute to FAC meetings and receive information on their outcome. Our audit visits confirmed their role in providing input whenever a topic concerning a given EU delegation featured on a FAC meeting agenda. Similarly, EEAS HQ held video meetings with all interested EU delegations to brief them on the outcome of FAC meetings.

98 The documents we received show that contributions were requested from the various EEAS divisions concerned and that the timeline for FAC meetings was usually adhered to, indicating good coordination in the planning and division of tasks. However, the EEAS's coordination with the Commission for the preparation of

briefings is hampered by the limited interoperability of their respective briefing applications. The EEAS has no access to BASIS. An “automated bridge” interface exists between e-brief and BASIS but only works for briefing requests made by the Commission’s Secretariat-General for the Commission’s President, Vice-Presidents or Secretary-General. Consequently, the preparation of some briefings coming from or involving Commission services is more time-consuming as it needs to be carried out via email exchange. Access to previous briefings is limited since not all can be found in the dedicated IT tool.

99 Council working groups play an important role in the preparation of FAC meetings. However, there is not always time for coordination in the reporting of all working groups. For example, the Council and the EEAS issue common reports for the African Working Group, but not for the Working Group on the Western Balkans Region. The Commission also issues its own separate reports. Moreover, each member state issues a report meaning up to 30 reports are produced for a single working group meeting.

Conclusions and recommendations

100 We conclude that, in most respects, the EEAS's coordination is effective within EEAS headquarters, with EU delegations and with the Commission and the Council, but there are some weaknesses in information management, staffing and reporting.

101 Following the internal EEAS@20 review exercise launched in February 2021, the EEAS took measures to improve its internal structure and functioning with the aim of becoming more effective in its geopolitical role through the EU delegations. Overall, the EEAS@20 review was valuable in identifying crucial areas for improvement. However, it was not accompanied by a clear, prioritised action plan or an implementation timetable to make all staff aware of planned or upcoming changes or the reasoning behind them (see paragraphs [22-24](#)).

102 Coordination within EEAS HQ works well overall thanks to improved working arrangements and guidelines. These are updated regularly and are listed in well-structured pages on the EEAS intranet. Regular formal and informal meetings are held between horizontal and thematic directorates, in addition to weekly senior management meetings which include the HR/VP's private office (see paragraphs [25-27](#)).

103 We identified several areas where information management was not fit for purpose, particularly where IT tools were concerned. This could lead to important information not being shared efficiently throughout the organisation. The EEAS has identified shortcomings and planned improvements. We found that, at the time of the audit, neither a collaborative platform nor a knowledge management platform were available. We also observed shortcomings in the search function of the existing record-keeping platform. The EEAS's IMS also identified these weaknesses. In addition, we found that the lack of centrally updated email distribution lists for sending reports posed difficulties for coordination (see paragraphs [29-37](#)).

Recommendation 1 – Ensure the implementation of the information management strategy

The EEAS should ensure that its collaborative and knowledge management platforms, as well as a corporate search function, become fully operational and provide for streamlined communication when implementing its information management strategy.

Target implementation date: December 2025

104 We found that problems linked to the use of IT tools directly affected coordination between institutions and hence the efficiency and effectiveness of working arrangements. The use of separate systems and software is confusing, for example, for EU delegation staff, who constantly have to use both Commission and EEAS tools for their work. Limitations in certain IT tools for secure communication impact their use, in particular at EU delegations. A regulation on information security has been proposed to help solve the issue of document security classification (see paragraphs [38-44](#)).

Recommendation 2 – Improve secure exchange of information

The EEAS should, in coordination with the Commission and Council where relevant:

- (a) seek to ensure the interoperability of its existing IT tools for secure communication and exchange of documents;
- (b) apply a standard document security classification across the different organisations (EEAS HQ, EU delegations, Commission and Council).

Target implementation date: for (a) December 2025, for (b) linked to the legislative proposal adoption date.

105 We conclude that EUDEL is a useful forum for coordination and backed up by good bilateral communication between HQ and EU delegations. Moreover, we found that the HQ and EU delegations maintained frequent communication, with delegation staff reporting that desk officers were in almost daily contact (see paragraphs [46-49](#)).

106 The EEAS has established clear instructions for EU delegations to prepare their planning documents and reports. However, we noted some shortcomings in relation to planning documents for ambassadors' mandates, such as the occasional absence of

mission letters, delayed instructions and critical EEAS HQ documents for the preparation of AMPs as well as a lack of feedback after their submission (see paragraphs 50-56).

107 We found that EU delegations did not receive regular feedback on political reporting, one of their key products, even though it was mostly sent in accordance with the guidelines and covered topics of EEAS and EU relevance. On the other hand, démarches were carried out on time, following clear instructions from EEAS HQ. The EEAS issued guidelines to improve policy interaction between the EU delegations and HQ. Many of the suggestions in these guidelines corroborate our findings, but not all had been followed up and implemented by the time of the audit. As regards the EU delegations' various reporting requirements towards both EEAS HQ and the Commission, a mapping exercise was launched in September 2022, but it was not comprehensive and did not include recommendations for simplification (see paragraphs 57-65).

Recommendation 3 – Improve interaction between EEAS HQ and EU delegations

The EEAS should take the following steps to improve coordination between EEAS HQ and EU delegations:

- (a) ensure that all EU ambassadors receive a mission letter at the beginning of their mandate;
- (b) in line with the Secretary-General's guidelines, review the timing of the sending of instructions for EU delegations on filling in the templates for their annual management plans and ensure that delegations receive systematic feedback on their plans;
- (c) ensure that, in line with the Secretary-General's guidelines, EU delegations provide regular political reporting and receive feedback and guidance from HQ.

Target implementation date: December 2024

108 Two high-level groups were set up to foster cooperation between the EEAS and the Commission. The Group for External Coordination (EXCO), intended for the day-to-day management of external affairs, functions well and helps the two bodies work better together. However, the Commissioners' Group on a Stronger Europe (CGSE), set up to provide a forum for strategic orientation, has not met since 2021 and appears to be inactive (see paragraphs 68-73).

109 The EEAS has put in place satisfactory procedures to monitor and participate in interservice consultations. EEAS legislative coordinators have access to an IT management tool shared with the Commission and monitor it daily. Contributions are provided where appropriate, in coordination with the relevant EEAS divisions (see paragraphs [74-75](#)).

110 There is a mix of different types of staff in EEAS HQ and EU delegations, including staff posted from the Commission. All EU delegation staff are subject to regular rotation, reflecting the EEAS's nature as a diplomatic service. These factors increase the importance of effective coordination in order to achieve a "one EU delegation" approach. The broadening scope of EU policies, and the fact that more and more policies have an external dimension, mean EU delegations need to be able to adapt and provide the appropriate policy expertise when required. The workload assessment of the Commission's staff in EU delegations revealed the need for targeted adjustments to staffing levels. Our visits to EU delegations and the survey of EU ambassadors highlighted a pattern of relative understaffing in the "political, press and information" sections of EU delegations (see paragraphs [76-87](#)).

Recommendation 4 – Facilitate the follow-up of the 2022 workload assessment in EU delegations

The EEAS should, in coordination with the Commission, facilitate the follow-up of the 2022 workload assessment as regards the allocation of all staff in EU delegations. This should be done as part of a wider strategic reflection on the EU delegations held at senior level between the EEAS and the Commission. In doing so, it should take into account the principle that the allocation of staff resources to EU delegations should be commensurate with policy and cooperation needs.

Target implementation date: December 2025

111 Overall, coordination with the European Council is well established and guided by clear rules and guidelines. Regarding the specific European Council meetings and summits, we found the EEAS followed the relevant rules of procedure and best practice guidelines (see paragraphs [90-94](#)).

112 The EEAS has well-established procedures for preparing Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) meetings and generally adheres to the different steps and deadlines. Similarly to preparations for European Council meetings and summits with non-EU countries and regional organisations, FAC meeting preparations entail a myriad of briefings, which

often also require coordination with the Commission. The lack of a common briefing tool reduces efficiency and makes it more difficult to find information later, as some contributions are not provided in the briefing applications (see paragraphs [95-99](#)).

Recommendation 5 – Improve interinstitutional coordination regarding briefing tools for the preparation of Foreign Affairs Council meetings

The EEAS should, in coordination with the Commission and Council, adopt a common briefing tool or, failing this, seek to ensure interoperability and reciprocal access to existing institutional tools.

Target implementation date: December 2025

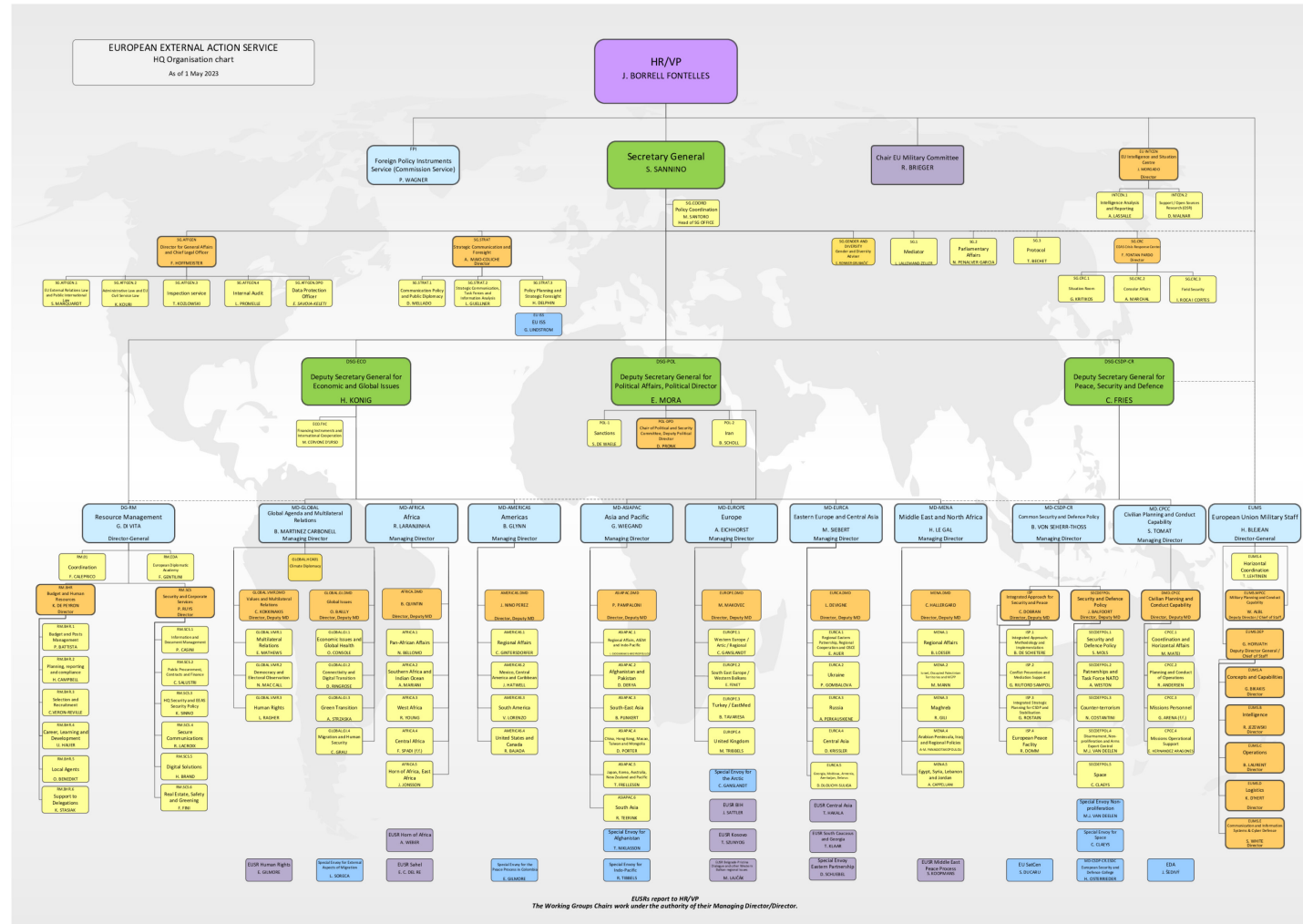
This report was adopted by Chamber III, headed by Mrs Bettina Jakobsen, Member of the Court of Auditors, in Luxembourg at its meeting of 12 December 2023.

For the Court of Auditors

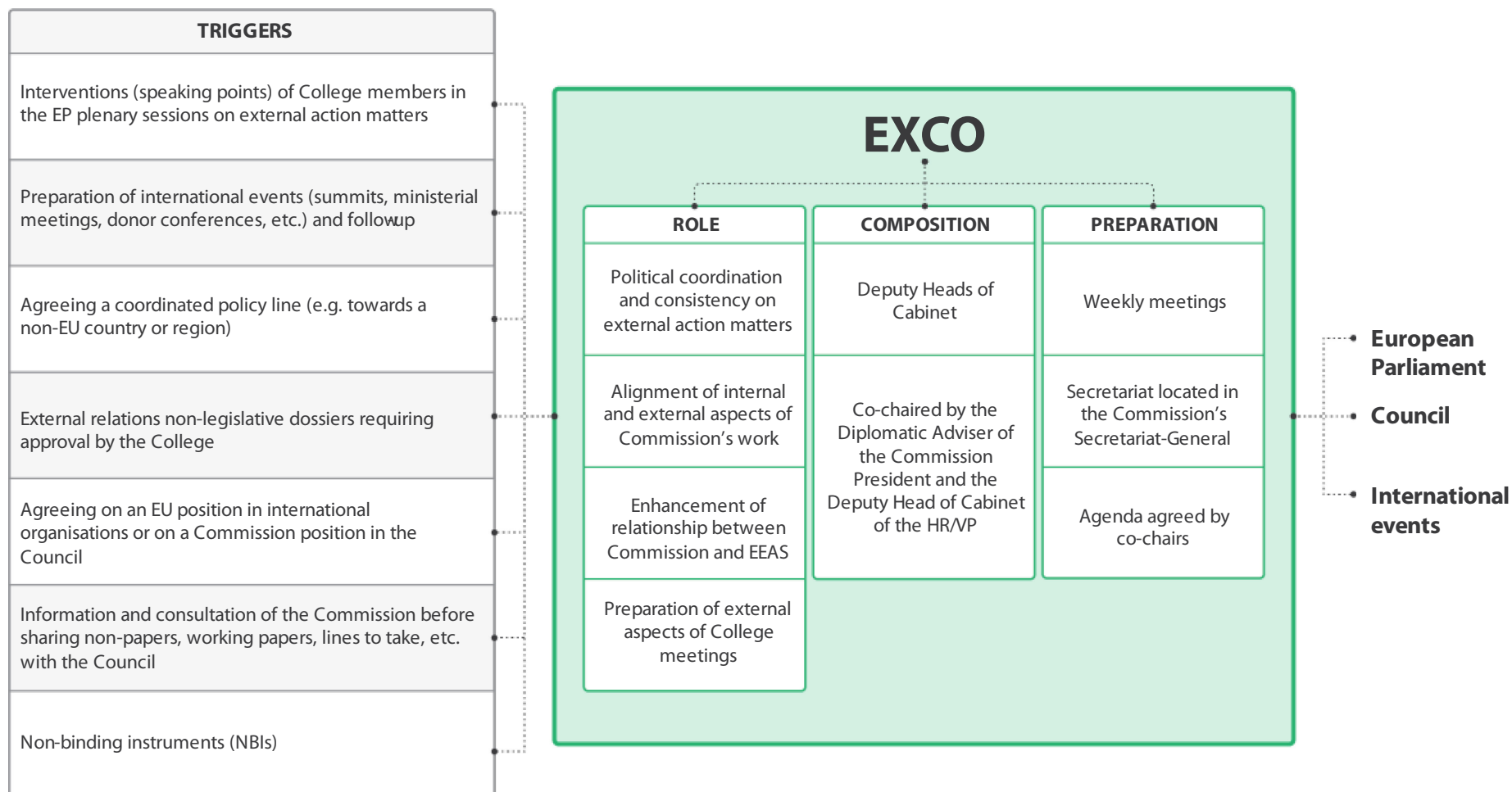
Tony Murphy
President

Annexes

Annex I – EEAS organisation chart



Annex II – EXCO role and process



Source: ECA.

Abbreviations

AMP: Annual management plan

ARES: Advance Records System

BASIS: Briefing application of the Commission

CGSE: Commissioners' Group on a Stronger Europe

COREPER: Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the European Union

COREU: *COR*respondance *EU*ropéenne – messages sent and received through the Courtesy system.

DG: Directorate General of the European Commission

DG BUDG: Directorate-General for Budget

DG DEVCO: DG for International Cooperation and Development (DG INTPA from 2021)

DG ECHO: Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

DG HR: Directorate-General for Human Resources

DG INTPA: Directorate-General for International Partnerships

DG NEAR: Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations

DG TRADE: Directorate-General for Trade

EEAS: European External Action Service

EEAS HQ: Headquarters of the European External Action Service, located in Brussels

EXCO: Group for External Coordination

FAC: Foreign Affairs Council

FPI: Service for Foreign Policy Instruments

HR/VP: High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission and President of the Foreign Affairs Council

IMS: Information management strategy

IAS: Internal Audit Service of the Commission

PSC: Political and Security Committee

SG.COORD: Policy Coordination Division

Glossary

AGORA: Online tool, used for collaboration by EU delegations and member state embassies in non-EU countries.

Démarche: Formal diplomatic representation, from one government or international organisation to another, of its official position, views or wishes on a given subject.

Discharge: Annual decision taken by the European Parliament giving the Commission final approval for the way a budget has been implemented.

EEAS@20: Internal consultation project on the future of the EEAS, using focus groups to generate ideas, identify challenges and formulate proposals for reform.

EU ambassador: Head of an EU delegation, whose responsibilities include assisting the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, and the Commission, in the field of external relations.

EU delegation: Diplomatic representation of the EU in a non-EU country or at an international organisation.

EU special representatives: Person promoting the EU's policies and interests in a specific region or country, and supporting the work of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs.

European Union classified information: Any information or material with an EU security classification, where unauthorised disclosure could harm the interests of the EU or of one or more member states.

Interservice consultation: Formal procedure whereby a Commission department seeks the advice or opinion of other departments on a proposal. This process may also involve the EEAS.

Political and Security Committee: Council body with responsibilities for the EU's common foreign, security and defence policies, that plays a leading role in crisis management. It is composed of member states' ambassadors to the EU and is chaired by the EEAS.

RESTREINT UE/EU RESTRICTED: Lowest of four levels of EU classified information that refer to information and material whose unauthorised disclosure could harm the interests of the EU or of one or more member states.

Replies of the European External Action Service

<https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications/sr-2024-02>

Timeline

<https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications/sr-2024-02>

Audit team

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This performance audit was carried out by Audit Chamber III External action, security and justice, headed by ECA Member Bettina Jakobsen. The audit was led by ECA Member Marek Opioła, supported by Kinga Wiśniewska-Danek, Head of Private Office and Bernard Witkos, Private Office Attaché; Michael Bain, Principal Manager; Naiara Zabala Eguiraun, Head of Task; Wayne Codd and Emmanuel-Douglas Hellinakis, Auditors. Michael Pyper provided linguistic support. Giuliana Lucchese provided graphic support.

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The European External Action Service (EEAS) is the diplomatic service of the European Union. Working together with the EU institutions to implement the EU's common foreign and security policy, it also provides support to the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP).

Our audit assessed whether the EEAS's coordination, both internally and with the Commission and Council, was effective. We found that coordination is mostly effective, allowing the service to properly support the HR/VP in delivering their mandate. However, we found some weaknesses in information management, staffing and reporting.

We recommend that the EEAS fully implement its information management strategy and, together with the Commission and the Council, improve briefing tools and the secure exchange of information. Furthermore, the EEAS should improve interaction with EU delegations in the areas of planning, reporting and feedback, and facilitate the follow-up of the 2022 workload assessment in EU delegations.

ECA special report pursuant to Article 287(4), second subparagraph, TFEU.



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