

Brussels,  
EPSO/MO/MV ARES (2023)s. 7543288

**NOTE FOR THE ATTENTION OF THE COMMON FRONT REPRESENTATIVES:  
C. SEBASTIANI, R. TRUJILLO, E. LIEBER, N. MAVRAGANIS, G. VLANDAS, H. CONEFREY**

### **Setting the record straight**

EPSO hereby takes the opportunity to reply to the open letter of 06.07.2023, entitled *EPSO competitions issues: urban legend or cruel reality?* (EPSO – European Public Shame Office) sent by the *Common Front* to the attention of the Director-General of DG HR, with copy to the Director of EPSO. This reply recalls EPSO's position<sup>1</sup> on many of the allegations and provides additional clarifications aimed at bringing forward the facts.

#### **On the cancellation of competition AST/154 and the 'enormous' number of complaints**

As regards the cancelled 6-field competition EPSO/AST/154/22, 6300 applications were received by the deadline (25.10.2022). The testing window was between 22.11 and 02.12.2022, with contingency testing until 09.12.2022, to test candidates who, for justified reasons, were not able to sit the test. 5693 candidates booked the online reasoning tests, of which 4636 candidates took the test (81% ). In total, 3515 (76%) candidates succeeded to obtain the pass mark in the first phase of the competition (verbal, numerical and abstract reasoning skills tests).

EPSO's Candidate Contact Service (CCS) received 967 questions and complaints. 197 candidates logged complaints on legitimate technical or organisational issues (4,2% of tested candidates). A failure rate of up to 5% (on the first attempt) is considered acceptable in the testing industry. 107 candidates were given a retesting opportunity, 90 others were not because their complaints did not meet the relevant criteria.

An extraordinary meeting of the Management Board, EPSO's governing body, was convened twice to discuss the issues encountered during this testing experience. EPSO also conducted an operational and a legal assessment of the situation. EPSO's recommendation was to move forward with the competition as planned. However, this competition was the first large-scale remote-only testing event and complaints covered different aspects, notably, booking of the testing slots, technical incidents in launching the test, proctor behaviour and confusion in where to get help. Because of these circumstances several Management Board members were not satisfied with the 'move forward' option.

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<sup>1</sup> Published on EPSO's website: <https://epso.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/Info%20Note%20on%20concerns.pdf>.  
Commission européenne, B-1049 Bruxelles / Europese Commissie, B-1049 Brussel - Belgium. Telephone: (32-2) 299 11 11.  
Office: L-107 03/DCS - Tel. direct line +32 229-56992  
E-mail: EPSO-DIRECTOR@ec.europa.eu

In view of that, and despite the high success rate, EPSO decided to cancel the competition and focus on improvements to the candidate experience, while planning to launch a new competition in the fields concerned as soon as feasible. In comparison, in competition EPSO/AST/155/2022, where testing was conducted soon after with some quick fixes, the number of complaints was below the average for EPSO competitions. Complaints are also an opportunity for EPSO and its contractor to keep improving the procedures in a spirit of continuous development. Even in situations where the number of complaints is below the average and therefore acceptable, we still investigate each one of them carefully and learn every time.

### **On whether cancellation was the best solution and why retesting was not an option**

Cancellation was not EPSO's first choice but the next best solution under the circumstances and only after careful legal and operational analysis and consultation of all members of the Management Board. It is regrettable, indeed, in particular for those 3515 candidates who passed the first phase. However, wider retesting (on top of those already conducted) was not a viable option in the absence of clear criteria. Retesting of candidates who did not fulfil the pre-established criteria would risk creating a never-ending cycle of retesting in future competitions. In addition, massive retesting without proper justification would also be an extremely costly and time-consuming exercise.

### **On EPSO having received in 2021 an opinion by the European Data Protection Supervisor**

We do not know to what opinion this refers to. We have not received any official opinion from EDPS in 2021. In March 2023, EDPS opened an audit on EPSO's preparation of the new competition model, including the use of remotely proctored testing. Hearings have been conducted in good collaboration with EDPS auditors and in full transparency. We are committed to following the advice already received, as well as the recommendations that will follow.

### **On the European Ombudsman inquiry**

EPSO has duly replied on 15.06.2023 to the inquiry opened by the European Ombudsman.

### **On the continuous problems with remote testing**

We are committed to offering candidates an optimal testing experience, but we do recognise that there are still occasional dysfunctions. We have never claimed that everything was perfect. Retesting is offered to candidates who do not manage to complete their tests due to factors outside their control. Most typical examples include connectivity issues, server downtime or a candidate not managing to launch the test.

Statistics relating to testing events organised after the cancellation of the EPSO/AST/154/22 competition demonstrate a downward trend as far as complaints and retesting requests are concerned. For the sake of full transparency, we are enclosing those figures<sup>2</sup>. We also have an intention to publish these figures in the future for all competitions on our website.

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<sup>2</sup> See Annex 1.

We recognise that a fully flawless online testing experience for each and every one of the thousands of candidates sitting the tests is not a realistic objective. We are striving for a demanding test portfolio and for a delivery mode that can be feasible with proper preparation and following the instructions. When something goes wrong, candidates have appropriate channels to file their complaint. Once validated, they are offered a retesting opportunity. It is worth noting that in the investigation, if the case is not clear-cut, the candidate always has a benefit of doubt, meaning that if we are not sure, candidate will get another chance.

### **On candidates with specific needs**

EPSO is dedicated to ensuring equal opportunities and access to its selection procedures to all candidates and, to this end, it continuously monitors all its testing and selection processes to ensure that this is upheld. EPSO provides the opportunity to all candidates to indicate whether they have any specific needs due to a disability or a medical condition, which could require reasonable accommodations at any or all stages of the EPSO selection process.

This information is clearly communicated from the outset on the EPSO website, in the application form and in each individual Notice of Competition (for open competitions) or call for expression of interest (for CAST selections). EPSO has developed promotional materials to demystify the reasonable accommodation process and to inform candidates on how to request adjustments in selection tests.

- For more information on EPSO's equality and diversity policy and on how it puts principles into action when it comes to candidates with **specific needs**, please visit: <https://epso.europa.eu/en/selection-procedure/equal-opportunities-diversity-inclusion>.
- For more information on EPSO's reasonable accommodation policy for **female candidates related to pregnancy and childbirth**, please visit: <https://epso.europa.eu/en/documents/reasonable-accommodation-policy-female-candidates-related-pregnancy-and-childbirth>.

### **On proctor behaviour and personal checks**

Experience has shown that the anti-cheating measures initially implemented by EPSO's contractor were perceived as overly invasive. For this reason, we have reviewed the proctor protocol. The personal checks are in the process of being reduced and proctors receive specific training for 'EU testing'. Automated proctoring (replacing the human proctors) will soon be a major step forward in the candidate experience. We do not expect complaints to go down to 0%, but we strive for continuous improvement.

### **On protecting the personal data of the candidates and on 'enormous amount of private data was sent to the United States, where the testing platform is based'**

Data protection is an essential part of EPSO's processes. A specific [privacy statement](#) on personal data protection within the framework of an open competition applies. The parent company of EPSO's contractor is US-based. The company with which EPSO signed a framework contract is based in Ireland. EU-origin was a precondition to qualify for applying to the call for tender in compliance with EU contracting rules. Our new Framework Contract ensures that the data collection that occurs during EPSO operations complies with EU data protection rules (it is stored in the EU, for a limited duration, with the usual safeguards and guarantees applying). The Framework Contract is solid as regards data protection requirements.

EPSO is fully aware that supervision of full compliance of data processing by the contractor is a complex issue, requiring proper attention in the preparation of the launch of the new model. We are in constant dialogue with the contractor to verify that what has been agreed is also implemented. We act on all substantiated allegations. Finally, we trust that the ongoing EDPS audit will bring clarity about the areas where we should do better.

### **On the adoption of the new competition model and decision-making processes**

EPSO is an interinstitutional Office with a governing structure defined in its Founding Decisions. The legal framework for our mission, including for Staff Committee consultation, stems from these Founding Decisions and the Staff Regulations. We respect that framework. In addition, we are open to dialogue and remain ready to provide more information when requested. We have in recent months participated in several events and meetings with the European Commission's Staff Committee representatives and are willing to continue that discussion. We also have an obligation to ensure that uniform standards are applied in EU selection procedures. Therefore, we cannot provide privileged treatment or alternative channels for complaint handling to internal candidates. The same channels for contact and submission of complaints are open to all citizens. As far as candidates' rights are concerned, the EU institutions offer a system that is probably stronger than in any other international organisation.

In conclusion, I would like to underline that we are still in the middle of a full transformation process, entering year 4 of a 5-year Strategic Roadmap. The innovative processes we are implementing require hard work and take time. They are by no means perfect, but are gradually improving, as you can see from the figures provided. The new competition model will also generate considerable savings, notably due to the discontinuation of the oral tests and the standardisation of the test portfolio.

We are constantly improving our communication with the candidates and investing in transparency. I invite you to visit our website where you can find various guidance notes<sup>3</sup> aimed at helping candidates to understand better the selection process and have as smooth a testing experience as possible.

Last but not least, it is worth recalling that EPSO's open competitions attract thousands of candidates. Thus, by their very nature, they are and will remain highly selective. Statistics demonstrate that even when testing goes smoothly, on average 96% of candidates do not pass. I understand that this can cause stress, frustration and disappointment. I would therefore suggest engaging in reinforced cooperation on how to best guide and encourage candidates as a more constructive way forward for all parties concerned.

[Electronically signed]

Minna VUORIO

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<sup>3</sup> For example, on the new competition model and types of tests, and on core IT requirements.

Enclosure: Annex - statistics of competitions 2023.

Copy: D. Mueller, N. Athanasiadou, S. Bikar (Cabinet Hahn); C. Roques, C. Levasseur, L. Duluc (DG HR); A. Katsogiannis (CSC);  
Members and observers of EPSO/EuSA Management Board;  
Members of the EPSO Working Group.

## Annex Statistics of competitions - 2023

**VNART: Verbal, Numerical and Abstract Reasoning (skills) Tests**

**L1: Language 1**

**CS: Case Study**

**WT: Written Test**

<b>EPSO/AST/151/22 ICT – MCQ + CS</b>	
Booking window	28 April - 4 May 2023
Testing window	11 + 16 May 2023 (contingency testing on 9 June 2023)
Type of exam	VNART (L1) + CS (Combined exam)
Number of applications	633
Number of bookings	579
Exams delivered	556
Pass rate % (MCQ only)	87,25%
<b>Valid complaints</b>	
Rescheduled candidates	11
Non-rescheduled	13
Total no. of valid complaints treated	24

<b>EPSO/AD/398/22 ICT – MCQ + CS</b>	
Booking window	20 - 26 April 2023
Testing window	4 + 10 May 2023 (contingency testing on 8 June 2023)
Type of exam	VNART (L1) + CS
Number of applications	1,067
Number of bookings	1,010
Exams delivered	955
Pass rate % (MCQ only)	75,6%
<b>Valid complaints</b>	
Rescheduled candidates	74
Non-rescheduled	31
Total no. of valid complaints	105

<b>Junior Professionals Programme - MCQ</b>	
Booking window	17 - 22 May 2023
Testing window	23 - 25 May 2023 (contingency testing until 7 June)
Type of exam	VNART in L1

Number of applications	616
Number of bookings	585
Exams delivered	550
Pass rate % (MCQ only)	42,5%
<b>Valid complaints</b>	
Rescheduled candidates	19
Non-rescheduled	7
Total no. of valid complaints treated	26

<b>EPSO/AD/400/22 Space and Defence (2 fields) - MCQ</b>	
Booking window	17 - 23 May 2023
Testing window	6 June 2023 (contingency testing until 16 June)
Type of exam	VNART in L1
Number of applications	318
Number of bookings	285
Exams delivered	279
Pass rate % (MCQ only)	84%
<b>Valid complaints</b>	
Rescheduled candidates	7
Non-rescheduled	7
Total no. of valid complaints treated	14

<b>EPSO/AD/400/22 Space and Defence (2 fields) – Written Test (pending SB validation)</b>	
Booking window	9 - 14 June 2023
Testing window	19 June 2023 (contingency testing 6 July)
Type of exam	Written Test
Number of applications	285
Number of bookings (regular booking window)	278
Exams delivered	272
Pass rate % (MCQ only)	Not applicable, WT
<b>Valid complaints</b>	
Rescheduled candidates	5
Non-rescheduled	3
Total no. of valid complaints	8

<b>EPSO/AST/153/22 EEAS Heads of Administration - Case Study</b>	
Booking window	5 - 11 May 2023
Testing window	26 May, 2023 (contingency testing on 16 June 2023)
Type of exam	Case Study
Number of applications	127
Number of bookings	122
Exams delivered	119
Pass rate % (MCQ only)	Not applicable, CS
<b>Valid complaints</b>	
Rescheduled candidates	2
Non-rescheduled	1
Total no. of valid complaints treated	3



<b>CAST Permanent - April 2023 Window</b>	
Booking window	17 Apr - 21 Apr 2023
Testing window	24 Apr - 28 Apr 2023 (contingency testing until 5 May)
Type of exam	VNART in L1
Number of applications	1,818
Number of bookings (regular booking window)	1,642
Exams delivered	1,511
Pass rate % (MCQ only)	Not yet available
<b>Valid complaints</b>	
Rescheduled candidates	35
Non-rescheduled	22
Total no. of valid complaints treated	57