

USF POSITION PAPER ON THE LARGE-SCALE REVIEW

Initial Statement

Union Syndicale Federale (USF) is a committed supporter of an efficient European public service that has its emphasis on serving the European citizens.

USF strongly believes that only by involving workers in shaping decisions which affect them can an organization be able to expect the wins that come from buy-in of ideas. This needs to involve workers' Unions as social partners in a "systematic, meaningful, and timely manner" consistent with what the Commission itself recommends in several key policy documents, such as the Hulpe Declaration and the Pact for Social Dialogue.

Further, workers representatives' involvement in shaping decisions affecting them is in line with legally established provisions on extraordinary relevant EU legislation, for example, in Regulation (EU) 2021/241 on the Recovery and Resilience Facility¹, Council Recommendation (EU) 2023/1389 on strengthening social dialogue in the EU², and the more recent Regulation (EU) 2024/1263 establishing the new EU economic governance framework³.

For consistency's sake, a Commission that wants to lead by example cannot allow this review to be yet another top-down process led by organizational innovation consultants who are unfamiliar with the complex, internal workings of the EU administration and civil service, and who do not have the priorities of the Union as their mission.

USF believes that a Commission that leads by example must shelter itself from toxic practices from the corporate world and follow instead more bottom-up approaches and horizontal decision-making practices. This will bring it closer to fulfilling its role as signatory of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The Commission should be leading the way in the European Digital and Technological Sovereignty. It should come with an ambitious and comprehensive plan for increasing strategic autonomy of IT solutions for the public administration.

¹ Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility (OJ L 57, 18.2.2021)

² Council Recommendation of 12 June 2023 on strengthening social dialogue in the European Union (OJ C, 6.12.2023)

³ Regulation (EU) 2024/1263 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2024 on the effective coordination of economic policies and on multilateral budgetary surveillance and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1466/97 (OJ L, 30.4.2024).

Points of concern for USF:

We demand clarity on the boundaries of the review process. In particular, that no part of this review will be used as justification or basis for any reform, however minimal, of the Staff Regulations.

USF demands to know to which extent the conclusions of this review are linked to the discussion and outcomes of the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework.

Staff working in European Union agencies, either decentralised or executive, are largely ignored in this exercise. This is shocking, knowing their large number and how badly they are likely to be impacted by this review.

People and Culture

Values

The common good of the European citizen must be the guiding principle of the organization. The way that freedom of expression is expressed has to be independent from individual Member States.

Leadership

Top level leadership is still perceived as abusive. Actions that go against what is preached (e.g. calls for more social dialogue while refusing to engage with social partners) undermine trust and create the perception of hidden agendas.

Leaders should abide by the same rules that they impose on the staff members. Leading by example, not by command.

Careers

The concept of doing more with less needs to be abandoned. It is erroneous, and the rise of precarious contracts in the European Civil Service only underlines how false it is.

A stronger Europe won't be achieved with a weakened and diluted European Civil Service. There is the need for real careers, not piecemeal options where European Civil Service experience constitutes a hindrance.

Less use of precarious contracts, better careers. The use of temporary contracts must be strictly limited, to prevent precarious jobs from becoming the standard recruitment means of the European Civil Service. The current structure of traineeships, contractor and maybe contract agent is nothing but a way to cheat people on careers.

Recruitment

More frequent and goal-oriented options enabling temporary and contract staff members to become officials.

The subcontracting of the competitions has had a very damaging effect on the external perception of the Commission. At the same time, it has not contributed to alleviating the burden over colleagues, or the need for resources.

The new competition model does not seem to allow the EU to recruit the best candidates, just those that are more experienced with the testing method.

Structures

Unlocking resources

Externalisation of tasks that can be carried out internally needs to be stopped. Less time managing contractors means more time for the public interest.

Set-up a program to gradually reduce the dependency on external service providers in the field of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). This contributes not only to European digital autonomy and independence, but also saves millions spent in licenses each year.

Change the ICT policy of Software as a Service: prioritize internal development of tools over externalisation. This means that tools are better fit for purpose -saving time in training and millions of Euros in licenses and support.

Offices and agencies

Agencies and offices, including decentralized ones, must be represented in the dedicated workstream. This should include both the administration and the staff representatives.

Align the working conditions in agencies with those of the Commission, giving more certainty and uniformity to the European civil service. Detect and reduce possible gaps.

Social dialogue in agencies should be aligned with and integrated into the Commission one.

Each job must have a working space. Increase in remote working should not come at the expense of office space or deteriorating office working conditions.

Ergonomic spaces, tools and accessories should be the default supply to workers, and not issued upon request.

Service model

If not staffed properly, the organization either recruits an appropriate number of staff, or it must refuse additional tasks.

Using contractors for permanent tasks is not a solution. On the contrary, heavy reliance on contractors for key tasks is a vulnerability to the organization.

Heavy reliance on precarious contracts is also a waste of time and resources for the organization. Significant time is lost in periodically training newcomer contractors upon contract expiration or change of staff knowledgeable with the tools and methods.

Heavy reliance on precarious contracts is also counterproductive, for instance when you find former contractors working for lobby groups.

The experimental GPT@JRC evolving into a corporate GPT@EC solution represents a success story of innovation and adoption of IT tools in the Commission. This dual model based on DIGIT/JRC cooperation should be extended to other strategic areas/domains where IT innovation is crucial, e.g. intelligence gathering for crisis management, or where services working in similar areas can support each other.

Processes

Innovation and AI

AI should be used as an empowering tool, not a “do more with less human resources” tool. This means that in no case can the staff reference table be reduced by introducing AI in the Commission services.

Large-scale training programs should be instated for all staff for using responsible AI tools to allow the empowerment of staff.

AI models and agents deployed should always be under strict human control and monitoring. To avoid increasing dependency on non-European sources and possible leakage of critical or sensitive information, European AI must be preferred and supported.

Set-up a roadmap for Digital and Technological Sovereignty in the Public Sector. This spans from corporate operating systems to workplace software and cloud environment. Open-source solutions should be preferred and developed in-house to meet the needs of the European public administration. Existing initiatives by NGOs or Member States (see <https://eu-os.eu/> and <https://thenewstack.io/eu-os-a-european-proposal-for-a-publicsector-linux-desktop/>) should be evaluated and potentially endorsed. The Commission should assume a leading role and responsibility in selecting adequate solutions and potentially prototyping and developing in-house modules.

Setting up a Joint Committee for ICT. The extensive use of IT technologies and the proliferation of ICT tools, including new ones such as generative AIs, has become an essential aspect of the workplace for the entirety of staff. Virtually no task can be achieved nowadays without some form of IT support. This committee would be responsible for managing the ICT policy and the deployment of tools, including responsible AI.

Discontinuation/De-prioritization

The use of FTEs for the management of contractors should be stopped (see Unlocking resources).

The deployment of responsible AI tools could make it possible to reduce or eliminate simple verification tasks. Of particular impact in HR, this would allow colleagues there to focus more on solving fundamental issues and less on routine verification tasks.

When taking up a project or a task, it should come with a sunset clause (e.g. 5/10 years). This would make project termination a default and not an option. Renewal of the activity would have to be properly justified.

A framework should be set in place where the political priority of a project would be periodically reviewed.