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## EPSO competitions

*Their masters, contractors and victims.*

*Where do we stand?*



**Will the saga of EPSO never end ...?** The people at the top of this organisation seem unable, or unwilling, to learn from their repeated blunders...

**The latest episode:** EPSO has now decided to suspend the competitions that were due to take place before the end of 2023, while the new session already scheduled for the economics competition (micro/macro economics, financial economics, industrial economics, etc.) has purely and simply been postponed indefinitely.

**These new developments deserve a brief reminder:**

**In November 2022, the Federation (FFPE)** was alerted by candidates to the particularly chaotic way in which the **AST/154/22** competition was being run.

**The FFPE** became concerned and sounded the alarm very early in December 2022 (hyperlink to text), and our trade union organisation was then the first to denounce the irregularities and inconsistencies of what was now a competition in name only.

Indeed, a multitude of technical glitches transformed the event into a course of obstacles, some of them insurmountable, and absurd chicanes to the point where it became a veritable gymkhana. It is no coincidence that DG HR had seen fit to outsource the organisation of the competition to a consortium of consultants.

The alarms raised by **the Federation** were relayed by the Central Staff Committee, which went so far as to question the Director of EPSO and the Director General of DG HR about the nature and extent of the problems encountered. Unfortunately, their responses did not live up to expectations, with them merely taking note of our concerns, without providing any substantive feedback or taking any real actions to resolve the technical problems that were being encountered.

In March 2023, **the Federation** once again voiced its alarm at [the bizarre way in which competitions were being organised](#): the instructions given to candidates were as tedious as they were obscure, with details and specifications that went beyond what was reasonable or necessary, and sometimes frankly infringed on candidates' rights to confidentiality and privacy.

In April 2023 **the Federation** returned to the fray ([hyperlink to the text](#)), further [exposing the recurring difficulties](#) experienced by candidates.

We were far from alone in doing so: **the European Ombudsman** had already decided to conduct an investigation into the malfunctioning of EPSO. Then **the Federation** took the decision to raise the matter at inter-union level because these problems were very broad in scope and it was necessary to confront DG HR with all of the unions in battle order. Hence [the strong message](#) sent to DG HR.

**The Federation** condemns these cancellations of competitions and 're-tests' which would never have been necessary if the Administration had assumed its responsibilities in the first place, rather than passing the buck to consultants whose pseudo-sophisticated techniques of dubious rationality have only led to general confusion and the squandering of public funds, not to mention of course the stress and sense of injustice felt by candidates, not to mention their disgust for the way they were being treated by the European civil service.

For example, according to some figures that we believe to be reliable, the cancellation of the AST 154 competition would have cost the EU budget no less than 300,000 euros, at a time when our Administration has set itself the goal of reducing the number of offices, buildings and parking spaces (except for the hierarchy, of course), cutting back on heating costs, complicating the formalities for missions as much as possible, and so on... So many savings that staff will not see any benefit from, even if they are supposed to be green... worse still, this sum of money could have been used for more useful purposes such as for example to improve the reclassification of contractual colleagues or allowing reduced meal prices for those on the lowest salaries.

In truth, we find it hard to accept that these malfunctions can be vainly explained away by EPSO hierarchy as being part of a "learning process". This would be asking candidates to accept that as participants in this learning phase they should pay the price for the vagaries of the new methods. This argument is worthless and breaks the essential principle of equality of citizens before public offices, at the same time as it casts a cold light on the technical competence of the contractors selected by DG HR / EPSO.

**The new EPSO competition system should have been tested beforehand**, [as other organisations such as AFFCE \(Association of French Civil Servants\) and AEFICE \(Association of Spanish Civil Servants\)](#) have strongly emphasised. We all thought that lessons had been learned, but unfortunately this was not the case, even though the Ombudsman (Mrs O'Reilly) had taken it upon herself to reprimand DG HR for its mistakes.

And indeed, the new **AD/403/23** competition soon turned out to be marred, once again, by technical problems. In reaction, EPSO announced that it would not organise any more

competitions before the end of 2023. The logic this time was undeniable: no more competitions equals no more risks, no more candidates harmed...

Would it not have been better to set up a working group with the staff representative organisations to draw up a list of the problems encountered, the pitfalls to be avoided, and the technical or other solutions to be provided? And then go back to the contractors with clear, agreed and rigorous instructions?

Even if the use of contractors is not in itself an aberration, the fact remains that this solution, which is all too often the easy way out, should only be used if the Administration and its offices are clearly unable to handle the task with their own staff. Mixed solutions could also be envisaged. The choice of contractors, where the criterion of low cost too often remains the determining factor to the detriment of seriousness and quality, must be very closely supervised. **The Administration must not pass on to third parties its core responsibility for the selection and recruitment of European civil service staff.**

The Administration seems to have increasingly lost sight of its responsibilities. Consultants are now proposing increasingly integrated 'solutions', including the provision of office space and the organisation of remote tests. Will the day come when they offer subjects, markers and even career plans? Candidates will have to watch out... already their time limit for lodging a complaint has been reduced to a bare minimum: three days instead of several weeks...

But now let's be even more concrete and ask those responsible to answer a few questions about a 'specialised' consultancy firm involved in the above-mentioned selection tests, in this case 'Prometric':

- How was this company selected by our hierarchy? What exactly was stipulated in the contract?
- Can we consider that this company performed its services in full compliance with the provisions of the contract?
- If the company has not properly fulfilled its contractual obligations and is responsible for the malfunctions in the organisation of the competitions, can the European institutions claim compensation from it?

**Liability should not be limited to third parties. The EPSO and DG HR hierarchies must not escape unscathed from the chaos in which the organisation (or non-organisation) of the competitions was plunged.** All those responsible must be identified, and not just those at the lower end of the chain. **There is no authority without responsibility. Our leaders must remember this and draw the necessary conclusions without delay.**

One of the conclusions would be to make EPSO's managers retake the same competitions as those organised by their contractors. There is no doubt that they would obtain very brilliant results.... or that they would, even more likely, **have to take the exit door...**

**The Federation You will never walk alone !**

The experienced and independent union