

Decision of the European Ombudsman on complaint 780/98/ME against the European Commission

Decision

Case 780/98/ME - Opened on 26/08/1998 - Decision on 02/05/2000

Strasbourg, 2 May 2000 Dear Mrs F., On 21 July 1998 you made a complaint to the European Ombudsman concerning the length of time it takes for the European Commission to reimburse travel expenses for experts attending meetings organised by the Commission. On 26 August 1998, I forwarded the complaint to the President of the European Commission. The European Commission sent its opinion on 27 October 1998. I forwarded it to you with an invitation to make observations, which you sent on 30 December 1998. On 3 February 1999 I wrote again to the Commission, requesting further information. The Commission sent its second opinion on 29 March 1999 and I forwarded it to you with an invitation to make observations, if you so wished. No observations appear to have been received from you. I am now writing to let you know the results of the inquiries that have been made.

THE COMPLAINT

The complainant, a national expert, who participated in meetings organised by the Commission, complained about the time it takes for the Commission to reimburse travel expenses. The complainant enclosed a document showing, in one case, a delay of five months for the reimbursement of expenses. Further the complainant expressed her astonishment at the fact that the Commission did not date the expense accounts.

THE INQUIRY

The Commission's opinion In its opinion the Commission put forward in summary the following: The objective of the Commission's services is to reimburse travel expenses to experts participating in meetings organised by the Commission within 60 days. During this period of time, the Directorate General organising the meeting shall gather the expert's bank identity. Directorate General IX shall then fix the amounts to be reimbursed, and ask for the payment, which is to be authorised by Directorate General XX and carried out by Directorate General XIX. The Commission maintained this objective until the end of 1996 when the Commission replaced the earlier accounting system with a computerised one. This change led to a delay in the reimbursement time (up to 180 days). In the light of that situation, the Commission introduced the MAP2000- reform to speed up the reimbursement. Cases dealt with after the implementation (1 April 1998) of the reform have been reimbursed within an average time of 60 days. The Commission put forward that, this complaint should be seen in connection with some general problems, which have since been solved. However, the Commission



regretted the delays in the present case but pointed out that these kinds of delays did not occur for all payments to the complainant. The Commission mentioned a meeting held on 16 March 1998 after which the complainant had received reimbursement on 16 April 1998. As regards the dates of the expense accounts, the Commission stated that the dates stamped on the envelopes ought to be taken into account. **The complainant's observations** The complainant stated in summary the following: She has been an external expert for more than 25 years and there have always been problems with reimbursement. However, the complainant was pleased with the fact that the Commission would observe the 60-day limit in the future and she confirmed that she had in fact lately been paid within the 60-day limit. As regards the dates being stamped on the envelopes, the complainant found it to be appropriate if the Commission also dated the accounts.

FURTHER INQUIRIES

After careful consideration of the Commission's opinion and the complainant's observations, it appeared that further inquiries were necessary. The Ombudsman asked the Commission to inform him about the exact time span between the dates of the committee meetings and the reimbursement of the expenses. In its further opinion the Commission enclosed a survey of the dates of the meetings attended by the complainant and the dates of reimbursement. The Commission regretted the situation of the reimbursement of travel expenses to experts and stated that it is trying to eliminate the problem. The Commission pointed out that since 1 April 1998, when the new system was put into place, expenses have been reimbursed within the 60-day limit as shown by the survey of the dates submitted by the Commission. The European Ombudsman forwarded the letter from the Commission to the complainant with an invitation to make further observations. The Ombudsman did not receive any further observations from the complainant.

THE DECISION

1 Reimbursement of travel expenses by the European Commission 1.1 The complainant complained that the time it takes the Commission to reimburse travel expenses is unreasonably long. The Commission acknowledged that there had been problems and apologised to the complainant. Further, the Commission insured that it had now taken measures to improve and shorten the time of reimbursement. 1.2 It appears from the complainant's observations that the complainant is satisfied that the Commission will observe the time limit in the future. The Commission also apologised for the delays and it appears from the information provided by the Commission that reimbursements made after 1 April 1998 were made within the 60-day limit. **2 Conclusion** On the basis of the European Ombudsman's inquiries into this complaint, there appears to have been no maladministration by the European Commission. The Ombudsman has therefore decided to close the case. The President of the Commission will also be informed of this decision. Yours sincerely Jacob Söderman