

Ombudsman asks EIB to review environmental impact of Spanish high-speed train project

Press release no. 13/2008 - 22/07/2008

The European Ombudsman, **P. Nikiforos Diamandouros**, has asked the European Investment Bank (EIB) to review the environmental impact of a planned high-speed railway line going through Barcelona, Spain. This follows a complaint from a resident of Barcelona, who alleged that the tunnel project for the train would cause serious environmental damage. In the complainant's view, the EIB's agreement to co-finance this segment of the project was wrong. During his investigation, the Ombudsman could not find any record of a proper review by the EIB of the environmental impact assessment for the segment of the project going through Barcelona. He therefore asked the EIB not to provide any financial assistance before carrying out and fully documenting such a review.

Background

In 1994, the Madrid-Barcelona-Perpignan-Montpellier axis was identified as one of the priority trans-European Network projects in the EU. In Spain, this project includes the development of the high-speed railway connection between Madrid and the French border (Madrid-Barcelona-Figueres). The EIB is to provide financing of 2 500 million EUR, which represents more than one quarter of the total cost. The remaining cost will be covered by the European Cohesion Fund and the Spanish authorities.

In January 2006, the complainant turned to the Ombudsman, arguing that the planned railway segment through the centre of Barcelona could cause serious environmental damage to surrounding buildings, whether public (e.g., Gaudí's "*Sagrada Família* ") or private. He criticised the Spanish authorities for not having properly assessed the project's environmental impact and for failing to examine possible alternative railway routes. In his view, the EIB should re-examine the project and re-consider its decision to finance it.

In its opinion, the EIB underlined that it had thoroughly reviewed the environmental impact assessment carried out by the Spanish authorities for this segment of the project. According to the EIB, the assessment was made in accordance with the EIB's own high standards.

In the course of his investigation of the complaint, the Ombudsman examined the relevant files. He could not find any documentary evidence of the EIB's review of the Spanish authorities' environmental impact assessment. The Ombudsman therefore called on the EIB to review and



fully document the assessment before giving any financial assistance to this part of the project. He asked the EIB to send him its detailed opinion before 30 September 2008.

To read the Ombudsman's draft recommendation, please go to:
<http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/recommen/en/060244.htm> [Link]

For information on the investigation: Mr José Martínez-Aragón, Principal Legal Advisor, tel: +33 3 88 17 2401