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Ombudsman: How to make the Commission's expert groups more balanced and transparent

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For more information:
www.ombudsman.europa.eu

Twitter:
[@EUombudsman](https://twitter.com/EUombudsman)

Contact:
Gundi Gadesmann,
Head of Media and
External Relations

T. +32 2 284 26 09

gundi.gadesmann@ombudsman.europa.eu

The European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, has made proposals to the European Commission on how to make its expert groups more balanced and transparent. The Commission oversees hundreds of such advisory groups which play a crucial role in the development of EU legislation and policy. The Ombudsman calls on the Commission to establish a legally binding framework for all expert groups, including a definition of what balanced representation in different groups should look like. She also recommends measures to reduce potential conflict of interest situations and to publish more information about the work of the groups. The Commission should reply to her proposals by 30 April 2015.

Emily O'Reilly explained: "In the past years, the Commission has done a lot to increase transparency and to promote more balanced interest representation in its expert groups. However, there is room for improvement if we want to be sure that the public can trust and scrutinise the work of these important groups. With my proposals, I want to help the Commission to tackle this complex and challenging task."

Concerns about perceived dominance of corporate interests

In May 2014, the Ombudsman started her own-initiative inquiry into the Commission's expert groups with a public consultation. The main problems raised in the contributions concerned the inconsistent categorisation of organisations who participate in expert groups, the perceived imbalance in favour of corporate interests in certain groups and potential conflicts of interest of experts who participate in their personal capacity.

Taking these contributions, as well as her own analysis into account, the Ombudsman asks the Commission to publish a call for applications for all expert groups, while continuing to proactively seek experts, and to create a single online portal for these calls. Furthermore, the categorisation of expert groups' members should be the same as in the Transparency Register. Organisations and individuals who fall within the scope of the Transparency Register should only be allowed to participate in expert groups if they are registered.

As concerns experts appointed in their personal capacity, the Ombudsman suggests that the Commission review its conflict of interest policy, by assessing their background more carefully and by publishing detailed CVs. Furthermore, minutes of expert group meetings should be as detailed as possible.

The Ombudsman advises the Commission to use the legally binding framework for DG AGRI's civil dialogue groups as a benchmark for all expert groups. In a separate investigation, she is currently looking into whether DG AGRI is properly implementing the obligations laid down in this framework.

The Ombudsman's letter to the Commission is available here:

<http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/cases/correspondence.faces/en/58861/html.bookmark>