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Ombudsman to keep an eye on Commission's late payment problems

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The European Ombudsman investigates complaints about maladministration in the EU institutions and bodies. Any EU citizen, resident, or an enterprise or association in a Member State, can lodge a complaint with the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman offers a fast, flexible and free means of solving problems with the EU administration.

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The European Ombudsman, P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, has commended the European Commission for the progress it has made in recent years in reducing its late payment problems. This follows an investigation and a public consultation that the Ombudsman conducted on this issue. He concluded that both the number of late payments and the overall sums of money affected by delays decreased considerably from 2008 to 2009. The Ombudsman noted, however, that problems still persisted. He invited the Commission to submit its 2010 figures as soon as possible, to enable him further to monitor the situation.

Considerable decrease in Commission late payments

Since 1995, the Ombudsman has conducted more than 60 investigations concerning late payments by the Commission. Most of these complaints were lodged by NGOs, companies, research centres, universities, and other associations involved in EU-funded projects and contracts. In addition, the Ombudsman has opened three investigations on his own initiative into measures taken by the Commission to improve the situation.

In January 2010, he launched a public consultation on the matter. Lack of co-ordination and excessive bureaucracy in the Commission were among the reasons listed for delays. Some contributors stated that, when faced with problems, interested parties are disinclined to contact the European Ombudsman for fear that doing so may result in their losing the Commission as a customer.

The Ombudsman concluded that measures, such as stricter time limits and increased use of lump sum payments, taken by the Commission to reduce late payment problems, have borne fruit. The proportion of late payments decreased from more than 22% in 2008 to 14% in 2009. Furthermore, the overall sums of money affected by delays more than halved between 2008 and 2009.

Problems remain, however, on other issues, including the amount of interest paid following payment delays. The Ombudsman also stressed that he would vigorously investigate any complaint alleging that a contractor had been discriminated against after turning to the Ombudsman.

In order to continue monitoring the situation, the Ombudsman asked the Commission to submit the figures for its performance in 2010 as soon as they become available.

The Ombudsman's full decision is available at: <http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/cases/decision.faces/en/10076/html.bookmark>