2004 Budget: section III, Commission

2003/2001(BUD) - 09/10/2003

The committee unanimously adopted the report by Jan MULDER (ELDR, NL) on the 2004 budget (Section III, Commission). As in 2003, MEPs' central concern was that the Community should have sufficient funding to make a success of enlargement. The key points of the report were as follows: - regarding agricultural expenditure (former Heading 1), far more emphasis should be placed on the tie-in between agriculture and the environment. Greater transparency was also needed, both on the origin of products and for consumer information. Funds should be earmarked for estimating whether part of the cost of eradicating contagious animal diseases can be covered by an insurance system, as already happens in some Member States. Funding should also be made available for European-level research into vaccines for such diseases. Animal welfare was a further area of concern to MEPs, who wished to retain the distinction between export refunds for live cattle and export refunds for beef and veal; - structural measures (Heading 2) should receive increased payment appropriations, despite the endemic problem of "outstanding commitments". Parliament was still awaiting information from the Commission as to what payments could still be made under the Structural Funds and what payments would be "decommitted"; - with regard to internal policy (Heading 3), the committee said that efforts should be made to improve the financial environment for SMEs in the accession countries. MEPs were also worried about the EU information offices, known as "Info Points", several of which were due to close on 1 January 2004. The Commission was asked to take immediate steps to find a solution that would enable the Info Points to continue operating, particularly given that the European elections would be taking place in June 2004. Research also remained a priority for Parliament, which wanted to reinstate the amounts originally proposed by the Commission for research policy; - external action (Heading 4) remained a source of tension. The report said that funding for reconstruction in Iraq must reflect the needs of the Iraqi people and be provided in the context of a political agreement under United Nations auspices. MEPs also stressed that previous priorities (Afghanistan, measures to fight poverty and AIDS) must not suffer as a result of constraints caused by the need to fund new areas of concern. In addition, they wanted funding to be substantially increased for measures to foster respect for human rights, consolidation of the rule of law and the development of civil rights, which were crucial for maintaining peace and security and preventing conflicts; - as regards administrative expenditure (Heading 5), the committee wanted the funding earmarked for 272 new posts at the Commission to be placed in the reserve. These funds would be released only when guarantees were provided that all the posts would be filled and that they would be used entirely to recruit staff from the accession countries. Another condition was that planned pilot projects and preparatory measures should be carried out, as Parliament had frequently urged; - lastly, the committee wanted to provide "an appropriate level" of payments for pre-accession funds (Heading 7) and reiterated Parliament's financial commitment to Bulgaria and Romania, aimed at enabling them to complete their pre-accession work and be ready to join the EU in 2007.