2001 discharge: EC general budget, Committee of the Regions

2002/2107(DEC) - 15/12/2003

The committee adopted the report by María Antonia AVILES PEREA (EPP-ED, E) proposing that Parliament should grant discharge to the Committee of the Regions (CoR) for the 2001 financial year. Parliament had postponed the granting of discharge in April 2003 following concerns about the COR's administrative and financial management (see summary dated 08/04/2003). In its comments accompanying the discharge decision, the committee pointed to the inconsistencies in the audit subsequently carried out by the Court of Auditors, which appeared to contradict the Court's own earlier findings. It regretted, for instance, that the Court of Auditors did not detect the shortcomings highlighted by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) as regards the procedures used by the CoR when concluding contracts and tenders. On the basis of OLAF's conclusions, the committee said that the CoR should in future provide its staff with training in financial and tendering procedures, should consider opening disciplinary proceedings against certain officials and should re-evaluate and, where necessary, recover payments made to certain Members for daily allowances and travel expenses. The report was particularly critical of the treatment meted out to the CoR's Financial Controller, saying that there had been "disrespect" for his institutional role and that the efforts of the Administration had been focused on discouraging or destabilising "the messenger of the bad news" rather than on changing things for the benefit of the CoR. However, the committee welcomed the various measures that had been taken by the President of the CoR in response to the OLAF report, in particular the efforts to recover payments. It noted the President's acknowledgement that there had been "an endemic culture of cronyism in the Committee of the Regions in 2001" and his intention of submitting an overall proposal in February 2004 for the administrative reform of the CoR. MEPs said that this proposal should be drawn up with "the active help of an outside expert" and forwarded as soon as possible to Parliament, which would take into account the CoR's commitment to the reform process when considering the discharge decision for 2002. In conclusion, the report called on the Committee of the Regions to provide a full report on the action taken to follow up the OLAF report, to provide Parliament with regular progress reports and to ensure that the reform measures allowed open reporting of irregularity and fraud "without risk of individual or institutional harassment". In this connection, it demanded better treatment of whistleblowers in future and called for the Financial Controller to receive a formal apology from the CoR's President and Secretary-General.