Discharges 2001: Commission's follow-up report on the general budget, EDF and ECSC budgets, Agencies budgets

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The committee adopted the report by Paulo CASACA (PES, P) on the follow-up to the recommendations made by Parliament when it gave discharge to the Commission for the 2001 budget. The report insisted that "individual Commissioners are politically responsible for wrongdoings by their departments" and are accountable to Parliament, while noting that so far no Commissioner had taken political responsibility for the abuses at Eurostat. Nevertheless, the committee recognised that Commissioners had admitted mistakes and were trying to develop an action plan to avoid "this kind of intolerable situation" happening again. MEPs criticised as unacceptable "the extremely long delays, the resistance and the hesitation of the Commission" in transmitting vital reports on Eurostat to Parliament. They said doubts still remained as to whether Commissioners might have had the alarming information on Eurostat contained in internal audit reports available to them. They also complained that sending files or complaints to the anti-fraud office OLAF had become a standard excuse for failing to act. The Commission's aspiration to create "the best administration in the world" had not yet by any means been achieved, MEPs said. The committee called on the Commission to put into practice immediately specific measures based on the recommendations made by the Internal Audit Service when investigating Eurostat: the Commission should strictly separate the tasks of management, supervision and auditing; the auditing teams within the directorates-general should cooperate closely with the IAS; and whistle-blowers should be able to turn to a body outside their institution (such as a law firm). MEPs also insisted that whistleblowers should be completely rehabilitated and compensated by the Commission, and compared the relative harshness with which they had been treated with the leniency shown towards officials investigated for serious wrongdoings. The report said that there was an urgent need to combat the culture of secrecy, complexity and lack of clarity in information flows. With regard to the Commission President's proposed action plan, the committee regretted that no proposals had been made for a structural change in the relations between Commissioners and directors-general and said that the leading role of Commissioners as well as their political responsibility needed to be clarified. The Commission should therefore submit concrete proposals on these issues by mid-February. The committee believed that the Commission's outsourcing practices were also to blame for the problems, and expressed particular concern about contracts awarded to one of the companies at the centre of the Eurostat affair outside the normal tendering procedures. MEPs said that the Commission should clearly review its 'Early Warning System". On other issues, MEPs found it unacceptable that the Commission was refusing to investigate the real ownership of companies applying for contracts from the Commission, especially when there are strong suspicions that Commission officials are their true owners. There was also concern over the obvious risks of fraud with sugar export refunds for countries from where sugar imports are duty-free and over the lack of action by the Commission against criminal adulteration of butter and other dairy products, which is in stark contrast to the rigour with which farmers are often prosecuted by the Commission for minor and formal faults.