

MINISTERS AGREE ON RADICAL CUTS TO EU BUREAUCRACY

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EU finance ministers on Friday (14 July) approved radical cuts in the European Commission staff budget, following proposals by the Finnish EU presidency, EUOBSERVER reports.

The presidency argued on Friday that Brussels cannot escape a similar process as is currently under way in many national capitals, which are trying to boost efficiency and reduce bureaucracy.

Helsinki wants to see a cut of 1700 eurocrat jobs over the next seven years which amounts to 8.5 percent of the commission staff - the equivalent of three departments (DGs).

"It can't be that we just have the EU institutions live their own life," commented Ulla-Maj Wideros, the Finnish coordinate minister of finance.

She maintained that despite the cuts, the necessary administrative adjustments linked to EU enlargement would still be secured, with the commission's staff budget rising by 3.4 percent as compared to the 2006 EU budget.

But the EU executive had favoured a budget rise by over 5 percent as the EU is most likely to take in Bulgaria and Romania next year, while there are still obligations to create new posts filled up by newcomers of the bloc's 2004 enlargement.

EU budget commissioner Dalia Grybauskaite said "We can't compare the national administrations with the European institutions as we have some specific rules here such as creating a geographical balance." Under the plan approved by the ministers, the commission argues it could not recruit anyone in 2007 for 801 posts originally projected for new member state officials - as the package provides €56 million less on salaries than Brussels' draft proposal.

Also, the EU regulator would only be able to replace 41 of the 460 officials from the old member states that will retire next year - a move that particularly angered Spain who voted against the Finnish presidency draft on the 2007 budget.

The budget commissioner added that national bureaucracies tend to eat up around 23 percent, in some states even 28 percent of a countries' budgets - which does not compare to the 5.5 percent taken up by all EU institutions, or 3.4 percent by the commission alone, within the EU budget.

But the new member states point out Brussels uses the enlargement argument to get more cash, while at the same time taking far too much time to fill up the posts allocated for newcomers.

"We have so far supported the commission but now we have a new strategy - to push it a bit as the nationals from the new countries have still not been chosen to take up the middle and higher management positions," one diplomat told the EUobserver.

"There are a number of secretaries or other administrative staff doing photocopying and similar jobs from our countries, but the new member states are more interested to get their people in positions where they can actually influence policies," he added.

Poland - as the biggest country with relatively the highest number of jobs to be offered has actually

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performed as one of the worst to get its nationals in the commission, with Warsaw expressing its dismay. Ms Grybauskaite, herself from Lithuania, admitted that the recruitment process for higher posts has been somewhat slower in the past few months, but said the commission is still keen to fulfil its annual target. But she added it is also the member states' problem - as they are not providing enough well-prepared experts to get the top eurocrat jobs.

Next year's EU budget including the staff issue will be subject to further discussions between the Finnish presidency, the commission and the European Parliament in the autumn, with the parliament also disliking member states' proposed cuts.