

EU agencies accused of conflicts of interest

European Parliament reprimands food advisory body for industry links.

BY DECLAN BUTLER

Three European agencies are fighting to rebut charges that they enjoy an overly cosy relationship with companies and interest groups.

The latest twist in the saga came last week, as the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), based in Parma, Italy, was urged by members of the European Parliament to tighten safeguards against potential conflicts of interest among its staff and advisers. In recent months, two other agencies — with responsibility for the environment and for the safety of human and animal medicines — have had to deal with conflict-of-interest allegations that have sparked concerns among some parliament members.

The timing of the row could not have been worse for EFSA, which has just begun rolling out a series of reforms intended to reinforce the independence of the food-safety and nutritional advice that it gives to policy-makers.

NEGATIVE PERCEPTION

On 9 May, EFSA announced that Diána Bánáti, director general of Hungary's Central Food Research Institute in Budapest, had resigned the previous day as chair of the authority's management board, an unpaid position. She had drawn criticism by accepting a full-time job as executive and scientific director of the European branch of the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI). The institute is a non-governmental organization based in Washington DC that coordinates and pays for research and risk assessments on topics such as food safety and nutrition, and which is funded by large food, chemical and pharmaceutical companies.

The new post was “incompatible” with a code of conduct for board members adopted in June 2011, says Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle, EFSA's executive director. The code stipulates that members must not act in any way that could create a potential conflict of interest or the public perception of one, or harm public trust in the authority. Geslain-Lanéelle complains that Bánáti only informed the authority about her appointment on the day that she signed the contract for her new position at ILSI. “EFSA regrets that this has happened, and the way it happened,” she says, adding that the situation risks creating a



Diána Bánáti denies any conflict of interest in her move to an industry-funded interest group.

“negative perception” of the authority.

Bánáti argues, however, that “this is the usual and accepted way in which people move from one job to another”. If EFSA required such notice at an earlier stage, she adds, it “would potentially infringe upon people's ability to manage their own careers”.

Following on from controversy over an earlier alleged conflict of interest (*Nature* 467, 647; 2010), Bánáti had resigned as a member of ILSI's European board of directors in October 2010, and was re-elected as chair of EFSA's board the same month. Since then, she says, “I have met many scientists who work with ILSI as a result of my normal scientific work”, but she adds that she had no formal relationship with the institute until it contacted her about the directorship in March. She insists that she has “continued to act in complete accordance not just with EFSA's rules, but my own personal moral code, which means I made decisions and offered opinions completely and solely on the basis of good science”.

In March, EFSA had unveiled new rules governing conflicts of interest for its in-house

staff, as well as its outside experts, including specified lists of activities that would preclude scientific experts from serving on advisory panels. Scientists previously employed by industry must now have a two-year ‘cooling-off’ period before they can sit on EFSA's scientific panels, for example, and scientists who receive more than 25% of their research funding from industry face other restrictions on the roles they can undertake at the authority. Former staff — but not scientific advisers — must notify EFSA of all new employment for two years after their departure, and can be asked to refrain from working with the authority in their new job for one year.

In the past few months, EFSA has begun to randomly screen the declarations of interests that its scientists must complete, and it has created a Committee on Conflicts of Interests to investigate any complaints about undue influence. Sue Davies, a vice-chair of EFSA's management board, who is also chief policy adviser at Which?, a UK consumer watchdog, says that the authority's efforts have helped to clarify how potential conflicts of interest should be managed. These can be particularly frequent in an area where industry and regulators often seek out the same experts for guidance.

Davies also emphasizes that EFSA's internal structure prevents its management board from influencing its scientific work. The board's tasks are administrative and strategic, she explains, and although it does oversee the authority's process for appointing external scientific experts to panels, it is not involved

in actually choosing them. Board members also have no role in EFSA's scientific deliberations, she adds.

Critics, however, remain unconvinced. In a statement, Nina Holland, a spokes-

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woman for the Brussels-based Corporate Europe Observatory, a non-governmental organization that campaigns against industry influence on European Union policy, described Bánáti's move as “an absolute scandal”. “EFSA's close links to the food lobby through ILSI Europe undermine the authority's ability to act in the public interest,” she said.

EFSA

Members of the European Parliament have also expressed their displeasure, last week voting by a narrow majority to defer approval of EFSA's 2010 budget report. The sanction is largely symbolic and of little practical consequence, but it is another blow to the authority's reputation.

As part of the same vote, the parliament also sanctioned the European Medicines Agency and the European Environment Agency over similar issues. Jacqueline McGlade, the director of the European Environment Agency, based in Copenhagen, has been chastised

for concurrently serving on the board of the Earthwatch Institute, an international environmental research and advocacy non-profit body, which has received funding from the agency. And in March, the European Medicines Agency in London was forced to place restrictions on former executive director Thomas Lönngren's employment for the next two years, following questions about his work as a pharmaceutical industry consultant.

Geslain-Lanéelle says she hopes that parliament will lift its sanction when it votes on the matter again in the autumn, after it has

received a report from the European Court of Auditors on the handling of potential conflicts of interest at EFSA.

But Bánáti warns that the authority's conflict-of-interest rules risk becoming too restrictive. "It is important to understand that scientists who work for EFSA do so in an unpaid capacity, offering their expertise as a public service," she says. "EFSA should respect the free choices of all the scientists of which it has need to do its valuable work, to manage their own careers and make their own choices as they see fit." ■ **SEE EDITORIAL P.279**

HIGHER EDUCATION

Go West, young Russian

President Putin to back scheme for students to study abroad.

BY QUIRIN SCHIERMEIER

In an effort to grow its scientific workforce and to stimulate international research collaborations, the Russian government is set to pay for thousands of Russian students to attend top universities around the world. But to benefit from the generous scholarships, the students must agree to apply their new-found skills back home — assuming that jobs will be waiting for them when they return.

Vladimir Putin, who took office as president last week following a controversial election, is expected to officially approve the five-billion-ruble (US\$165-million) Global Education programme by the end of this month. His pre-election promises included a pledge to substantially increase government funding of science and education (see *Nature* **483**, 253–254; 2012).

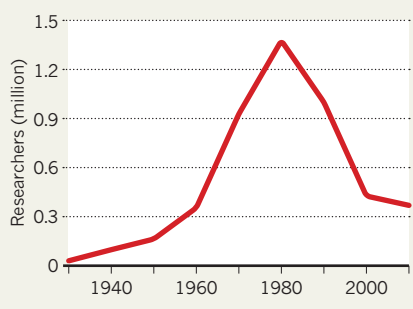
The programme will be run by the Strategic Initiatives Agency, a government-funded bureau set up last year with a view to promote social and economic innovation in Russia. The first call for applications should be launched next month, says Dmitry Peskov, who is head of the agency's division for young professionals and oversees the programme. "We have the means to very generously support up to 2,000 talented Russian students per year," he says.

The scheme will initially operate for three years, but may be extended following a performance review planned for 2015. Students in all fields of science, technology, medicine, social science and business will be eligible for the grant — as long as they attend one of the top 300 universities in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, says Peskov.

Students will be asked

AFTER THE FALL

Russia's ministry of education and science estimates that the country now has only one-quarter of the number of researchers who were working during the prime of the Soviet Union.



to sign a contract with the agency, in which they agree to return to Russia and secure professional work there for at least three years after graduation. If they sign up, the agency will cover their travel, tuition fees and living expenses. But they will also be obliged to pay back the full stipend if they choose not to return.

"The good thing is that the initiative is in the hands of students, who will be selected — or not — on the basis of merit by foreign schools," says Konstantin Severinov, a molecular biologist at Rutgers University in Piscataway, New Jersey, who runs research groups at the Russian Academy of Sciences' institutes for molecular genetics and gene biology in Moscow. "That way, Russian university administrators cannot exert too much control" over which students receive the awards, he says.

Although he welcomes the scheme, Severinov warns that it is far from certain that there will be adequate career opportunities for the returnees. Russian science continues to struggle to regain the strength of its Soviet glory

days (see 'After the fall'), and domestic high-technology industries are still in their infancy. In the short term, the lack of jobs may force these students to seek work abroad, says Severinov, contributing to the brain drain that the programme is meant to reduce.

However, similar schemes have proven effective in other countries. China — now a scientific powerhouse — has benefited considerably from government-sponsored overseas training of hundreds of thousands of students since the 1970s. The students' international experience also helps to bolster international research partnerships once they return home. A smaller programme, running since 1994, has helped to rejuvenate science in Kazakhstan. And Brazil, where scientists and engineers are in high demand, last year announced plans to send 75,000 students abroad by the end of 2014 (see *Nature* go.nature.com/x4vaoy; 2011).

Working with foreign supervisors can help to open up valuable research opportunities, says chemist Xinjiao Wang of the Ruhr University Bochum, Germany. Last year, the China Scholarship Council, based in Beijing, which funds international study, gave Wang an 'outstanding student' award worth \$5,000 for her graduate research on nickel compounds at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany. "In Germany, I've really learned how to create new ideas in science," she says. ■

CORRECTION

In the Editorial 'Price of freedom' (*Nature* **485**, 148; 2012), we stated that 'plenty of European scientists will be lost'. 'European scientists' should have been 'European science', as we meant to refer to science on the Jovian moon Europa.

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