



Timmermans takes swipe at MEPs on transparency

By **HONOR MAHONY**  

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EU commission vice-president Frans Timmermans has taken a swipe at MEPs who preach transparency but have not implemented the same rules as the commission when it comes to meetings with lobbyists.

Making a pointed reference to this "august" building during a transparency debate on Thursday (23 April), Timmermans noted that while the parliament asks many questions of him, it gets "irritated" when the process is reversed.

"It's not wrong for me to say to the European Parliament: 'Yes you are right to ask of us. And yes we need to do even better than we are today. But hey European Parliament, why don't you do what we're doing?'"

"When I ask that some members get really irritated with me. One member of the European Parliament who is very much engaged in this issue - from the (centre-right) EPP - said 'we've been elected, you have not. So we don't have to do the same register that you have done'".

Timmermans said he "did not follow the logic" of that reasoning noting to the outside world, all EU institutions appear the same.

Transparency and the role of lobbyists in EU law-making has become an increasingly hot topic in Brussels in recent years with the scope of legislation increasing, but the way it is done not becoming more open.

"We just don't know how many lobbyists there are in Brussels or how they influence law-making," said Daniel Freund of Transparency International. Estimates run from around 15,000 to as many as 30,000.

Mandatory or not

A long-running debate has been whether to make a lobbyist register mandatory. The current commission took steps to improve transparency by saying that commissioners, cabinet members and heads of departments may only meet registered lobbyists and must then publicise these meetings.

This what Timmermans wants MEPs to do too.

Timmermans noted that since the new measures came into place information from about 3000 meetings have been publicised and more than 1000 more lobbyists have signed up to the register including big names such as Heineken, the Royal Bank of Scotland and Coca Cola.

"Our initiative has given [the register] a mandatory dimension."

But NGOs were quick to stop the self-congratulatory flow. Transparency International noted that while 3000 meetings were registered, the information was spread across 98 different webpages.



Transparency - a hot topic when it comes to EU law-making (Photo: [European Commission](#))

And there is still the problem of the list not being verified with banking giant Goldman Sachs' putting itself down as spending less than €50,000 on lobbying, seen by activists as one of the more egregious examples of companies being economical with the truth.

Meanwhile, the register's search function is seen as weak. Pam Bartlett Quinanilla, a campaigner at Access Info Europe, noted that a recent search on the EU-US trade agreement (TTIP) - one of biggest and most fiercely debate policy initiatives of recent years - yielded a "not very realistic" 58 results.

But if the commission is viewed as not being up to scratch on transparency and the parliament even less so, it is the council, representing member states, that comes in a distant third of the three institutions.

Carl Dolan, director of Transparency International in Brussels, said the council needs to take "remedial classes" because of its secretive working groups and lack of access to documents.

It should stop acting like a "sullen teenager" and constructively engage the debate about transparency and lobbying.

Inga Reine, head of institutional affairs in Latvia's EU representation, said it still had to be decided where the "focal point" of decision making is in the council.

She said there has never been any denial that member states delegation are being lobbied but the issue is whether they are covered by EU or national lobbying rules.

Inter-institutional agreement

The transparency question will remain a big topic throughout this year. The three main institutions are currently negotiating an 'intern-institutional agreement' on better law-making.

Timmermans said he wants to see draft legislation as well as draft implementing and delegated acts - secondary tweaking legislation that is hard to keep track of - published so they are "open to comments by the public".

And he said the commission would push to have a common mandatory register between all three institutions, making a proposal by the end of the year.

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