



EU's poor record on transparency and ethics dents public support

by Natacha Cingotti

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Lobbying scandals have shaken the Brussels bubble repeatedly in recent years and yet the lessons have not been learned, writes campaigner

It is almost two years since the European Parliament was struck by the 'cash-for-amendment' scandal, in which several MEPs were caught red-handed accepting money for tabling legislation. A major breakthrough in ethics regulation was achieved when the parliament adopted a code of conduct in response. One year later, however, the code remains poorly enforced. Some MEPs' declarations of interest are incomplete and out of date. A certain number of MEPs have remained outside financial interests and occupations that risk conflicts of interest, and potentially new scandals.

At the end of 2012, European Health and Consumer Commissioner John Dalli stepped down following allegations he was aware of attempts by the tobacco industry to exert undue influence on legislation. The full facts leading to his resignation, including the European Anti-fraud Office report, have not been made public. Several European leaders have called for a special parliamentary committee to investigate whether the European Commission acted transparently in the Dalli case.

And 2013 is the 'European Year of Citizens' and is advertised by the European Union institutions as a way to "stimulate dialogue between governments and society, and thereby better engage citizens in debates and decisions that affect them". Yet, public concerns about how decisions are made are not being heard. A new [survey commissioned by Friends of the Earth Europe, Access Info Europe, Aitec, Environmental Law Service, Health Action International and Spinwatch](#) was conducted in six European countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, France, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom. It confirms that citizens' perceptions are negatively impacted by the current lack of transparency and ethics regulation.

Some 73 per cent of respondents are concerned that lobbyists representing the business sector have too much influence on EU decisions, illustrating mounting public worry about the lack of transparency of decision-making in Brussels. With an incomplete and voluntary-only lobbying register, citizens are not yet able to access accurate data about who is lobbying in Brussels, with what resources and on which topics. Such a lack of data also means that power imbalances and attempts at undue influence remain possible and very difficult to detect.

And 80 per cent of those surveyed believe there should be mandatory regulation of lobbying to ensure balanced participation of different interests in decision-making - a very clear call for better regulation of lobbyists as well as increased transparency for the EU. Four out of five respondents - or 80 per cent - in the survey feel less confident that an MEP represents the best interests of citizens if they also work for a lobby group or a private company. Despite the introduction of the code of conduct for MEPs, it is still possible for MEPs to hold significant financial interests - including occupations in a lobby group or private sector company while serving as an elected representative.

This should send a clear message to European decision-makers that ethics issues matter to the people and affect their perceptions of European institutions. Strict measures are needed as a response. Proactive transparency and ethics regulation is the best tool for institutions and decision-makers to avoid new scandals. Measures such as the introduction of a mandatory lobby register, the publication of policy-makers' meetings with lobbyists, better disclosure of outside financial interests and the application of tight ethics rules when such links exist can and should be enforced. Arguments that these are too difficult or too costly to put in place miss the real cost of inaction - a tarnished image and the loss of citizens' trust. One year ahead of the 2014 European Parliament elections and the renewal of the European College of Commissioners, it is time to learn the lessons of recent scandals and strengthen transparency and ethics rules.

Natacha Cingotti is a transparency campaigner at the Friends of the Earth Europe campaign group

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