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Parliament Vice-President Rainer Wieland has warned against the negative impact of new lobbying transparency measures, saying they could seriously hamper the institution's work.

130 September 2013

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Rainer Wieland, Vice-President of the European Parliament, points out the pitfalls of transparency measures

Draft measures on transparency and openness of data and information could be too much of an administrative burdens for lawmakers, Wieland, a centre-right German MEP, argued on Friday (27 September).

Defending the Parliament from NGO criticism of on-going initiatives, Wieland said: "We should think twice which mechanisms we use".

Bundling and opening up data to the public is tricky, he said. "If you allow aggregated figures or rankings – which media like very much – then you will see a reaction from colleague MEPs."

Parliament allows written explanations of votes to shorten its plenary sessions, Wieland pointed out, and since these count as speaking time, MEPs are all too keen to send in their written versions, leading to piles of paperwork.

The vice-president warned against too much tightening of the requirements for MEPs to report on meetings with lobbyists or experts: "I don't think it is up to a free, elected member of parliament to [keep a] record of all the persons he or she met with."

Parliament can look into suspected abuse when it is flagged by outsiders, Wieland said, but it is not their responsibility to systematically report meetings. "Also, every lobbyist will want to meet, just to show up and demonstrate [to their CEO] that they are worth their money."

Part of the Zeitgeist

Wieland was speaking at a seminar in Parliament for 'International Right to Know Day' on Friday (27 September). Transparency NGOs Alter-EU, Access Info Europe and VoteWatch joined the debate, with other civil society representatives in the audience.

Berating media and NGOs' approach to lobbying, he said: "Not every lobbyist is part of a dark plan. In fifteen years [working in EU institutions], not a single lobbyist approached me in a way that a red line was even in sight."

"Transparency and issues of privacy are part of today's *Zeitgeist*," the incumbent European ombudsman, Nikiforos Diamandouros, said at the seminar. "The most consistent complaint to the Ombudsman is about lack of transparency in the EU institutions."

"The right to know is an extremely important right for the European citizens," he continued. "Only if they feel the institutions are transparent, will the public trust their decisions."

Diamandouros steps down as ombudsman this week after being in office since 2003. The current Irish ombudsman Emily O'Reilly will replace him, having taken the oath of office at the Court of Justice on Monday (30 September).

Register under scrutiny

The issue of transparency has gained political impetus over the past months, during which time the European Transparency Register has been scrutinised by a joint Commission and Parliament working group. On Monday (30 September) the working group will discuss its review of the register.

The transparency register is a joint office set up in 2011 that documents lobbying activities in Brussels. It currently contains just under 6,000 registered organisations, which corresponds to roughly 29,000 lobbyists.

It has been criticised in the past for being inaccurate and flawed. In an interview with EurActiv, the president of the Brussels-based umbrella organisation for lobbying firms Epaca, Karl Isaksson, said the register suffered from a lack of resources.

The Commission should also incentivise lobbying firms to register, Isaksson said: "If Commission staff asks people on a regular basis whether they are in the register or not, that can push people to register. This question is seldom asked – I think that's a shame."

Addressing the need for more resources in Friday's debate, Maroš Šefčovič, vice-president of the European Commission in charge of inter-institutional affairs, said: "We now have 6,000 [freedom of information] requests. Some are hundreds of pages long and have to be checked."

BACKGROUND:

The European Commission and Parliament are reviewing the transparency register, a cornerstone of the EU's transparency initiatives, in a series of working group meetings. The series of meetings started in August and is expected to finish in December 2013.

The European transparency register came into effect in June 2011. The register is a database of lobby firms and other organisations working on EU

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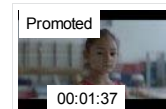
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"We are not rolling back what was achieved and what was granted to the citizens. We want to make things clearer and open up access," Šefčovič said.

NEXT STEPS:

- **30 Sept:** Oath of office of the new European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly
- **30 Sept:** Meeting of the joint Parliament-Commission working group on a future reform of the Transparency Register
- **Dec 2013:** Target date to finish the review procedure of the register

Laurens Cerulus

EXTERNAL LINKS

European Institutions

- [Background document on the review procedure of the register](#)
- [European Ombudsman website](#)
- [Transparency register website](#)

Transparency NGOs

- [ALTER-EU](#)
- [VoteWatch](#)
- [Access Info Europe](#)

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