


European commission

European commission spending thousands on 'air taxis' for top officials

EU executive releases two months of travel costs for 2016, revealing use of chartered planes for Brussels' 28 commissioners



 Federica Mogherini, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs, took the most expensive trip on the list. Photograph: Rex/Shutterstock



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Daniel Boffey in Brussels

Wednesday 9 August 2017 17.45 BST

Jean-Claude Juncker and his top officials are spending tens of thousands of euros on chartering private planes, according to documents detailing the European commission's travel expenses.

After three years of battling with transparency campaigners fighting for full disclosure, the EU's executive has released two months of travel costs for 2016, revealing regular use of chartered planes to transport Brussels' 28 commissioners.

The most expensive mission for which details have been released was in the name of Federica Mogherini, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs. It cost €77,118 for her and aides to travel by "air taxi" to summits in Azerbaijan and Armenia between 29 February and 2 March 2016.

A two-day visit by Juncker, the [European commission](#) president, with a delegation of eight people to see Italy's political leaders in Rome in February 2016 cost €27,000, again due to the chartering of a private plane.

Mina Andreeva, a commission spokeswoman, said the use of air taxis was only allowed where commercial flights were either not available or their flight plans did not fit in with a commissioner's agenda. Security concerns would also allow the chartering of a private plane under commission rules.

She said of Juncker's trip that there had been "no available commercial plane to fit the president's agenda" in Italy, where he met the Italian president and prime minister, among other dignitaries.

The spokeswoman added that the EU's total spending on such administrative costs was publicly available and that the organisation led the way in being transparent in their work. The commission was not able to provide details of how many planes are chartered by Brussels every year, although she insisted the number was limited.

The travel costs accumulated by the commissioners come out of the general budget, agreed by the member states. The costs of future travel expenses, could form part of the UK's divorce bill, as the UK government recognises it has committed to paying into aspects of the EU's budget beyond the date of withdrawal, in March 2019, however negotiations on the financial settlement are yet to begin in earnest. A commission spokesperson dismissed speculation of how future mission expenses could be covered as "hypothetical".

The commission was embarrassed earlier this year, however, when a plane was chartered to take officials to Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, to mark its time holding the rolling presidency of the European council, only for the plane's crew to delay the flight due to a need for them to take a break due to working time restrictions.

Helen Darbishire, founder and director of Access Info [Europe](#), which sought the travel costs, said she was disappointed that three years after seeking disclosure by the commission, the number of travel reports was so limited.

She said: "Initially [the commission] only released the general totals. Later we received data in which the names of the European commissioners and the travel dates were blacked out. By then, requesting each commissioner's data separately, we could obtain more information. For example, at the end of 2016 we received the cost notes of six commissioners from a two-month period in 2015."

In 2017, Access Info Europe launched a public campaign calling on European citizens to request the commission's travel expenses via an online form. That resulted in the release of documents for January and February 2016.

According to the commission, disclosing the travel expenses for the other 10 months of 2016 would create an "excessive administrative burden".

Speaking to reporters in Brussels, Andreeva, the commission spokeswoman, added: "I think we do publish information on expenses whenever we are asked to provide information ... I think it is not possible on a case-by-case basis to publish all expenses of people travelling."

According to documents relating to the two months in 2016, total travel and accommodation costs for visits by commissioners to European parliament sessions in Strasbourg, the World Economic Forum in Davos and official missions to countries came to €492,249, an average of €8,790 a month per commissioner.

They stayed abroad 467 times in the period, amounting to eight nights per person per month. The most travelled was the German commissioner for the budget, Günther Oettinger. During 13 missions to six European countries, he spent 35 nights abroad in the two-month period.

An analysis of the 261 missions showed that the European commission was generally careful in its spending, with hotel costs regularly coming to less than €200 a night. The most expensive overnight stay was in Addis Ababa and cost

€629.

Darbishire said she was raising the disclosure issue with the European ombudsman for good administration. “We hope the ombudsman will launch a debate about what expenses the European commission should make public,” she told the Belgian magazine Knack, with whom her NGO worked on the project.

“Not only in response to specific applications, but on their own initiative. Because that is normal in modern democracy.”

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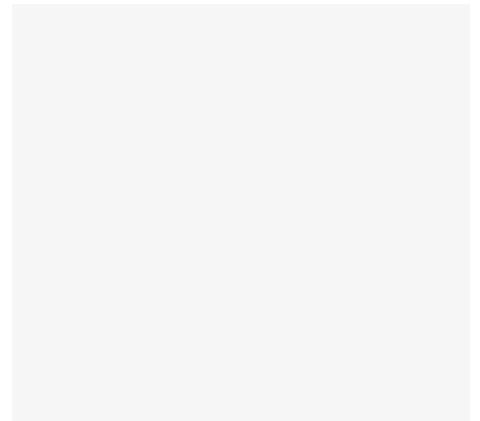
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