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Fighting fraud and corruption across the EU

Benedek Jávor, a Green MEP that has been championing the fight against corruption in the EU institutions on behalf of the Greens/EFA group, explains how the EU institutions can and should work hard to end corruption, fraud and misspending.

Q: So, what are you trying to achieve? What happened today?

I've been working on a report that aims to analyse how effectively the EU institutions manage their budgets and tackle corruption and waste of money across the EU. This is an annual European Parliament report and this year it was the Greens/EFA's turn to research and draft it. So we worked hard to include progressive measures to ensure that this money, which comes from EU taxpayers, is spent both honestly and competently. The report was voted today in the budgetary control committee and was adopted by an overwhelming majority.

Q: What progressive measures do you mean?

Well, first of all, we are calling for the creation of a corruption index to direct the scarce monitoring and supervision resources on countries most at risk of corruption. This way we can carry out investigations more effectively and target corruption risks in a more systematic way.

We also think that the European Commission should not only monitor how the member states tackle corruption, but should ensure it carries out honest assessments of its own internal corruption risks. For example, we are calling for better and more independent oversight of the EU's and more specifically the Commission's own anti-fraud measures.

Q: Did you include anything to protect whistle-blowers who uncover corruption but might be too scared or unprotected to report it?

This is a key green demand. Right now, people who place themselves at risk in order to call out cheating or foul play by their company or organisation get no legal protection at all and are vulnerable to vengeful action from those they expose. We want to change this and ensure at least some protection, so we've added recommendations in this report. We are also fighting in other areas to push for harmonised legal protection for whistle-blowers across the EU.

If whistle-blowers were adequately protected, it could mean more people speaking out against fraud and corruption with say, resulting benefits for consumers or the public purse. For example, as a result of

Antoine Deltour speaking out about the tax deals given to huge multinationals, there is now far greater public awareness of the need for member states to stop the race to the bottom in terms of tax deals with multinationals.

Q: What about VAT fraud?

The fight against VAT fraud is very important and represents a major loss of revenue for the EU as a whole (in 2013 the VAT shortfall amounted to €168bn). While the member states fight against VAT fraud at national level, the EU needs to step in to tackle transnational VAT fraud or the so called "VAT carrousel", and for this it needs to be included in the mandate of the European Public Prosecutors Office, which we have been negotiating for years now.

Q: Why did you mention tobacco in a report about corruption?

Ah hah! It might not be obvious at first glance but actually, the EU as a whole loses around €10bn in tax revenue EVERY YEAR due to tobacco smuggling. What's worse is that most EU institutions, with the exception of the Directorate-General responsible for health, have not respected their international commitments on how to handle contact with tobacco lobbyists. We firmly believe that public health cannot be part of a trade-off with tobacco companies and that's why I'm demanding that the EU Commission respect its commitments in this report.

Q: If the EU does everything in the report, what would it mean for EU citizens?

It would have a big impact! One immediate benefit to EU citizens could be through reducing VAT or tobacco fraud. As VAT is one of the EU's main sources of revenue, tackling VAT fraud means the EU gets more revenue to spend on worthwhile projects that stand to benefit EU citizens and encourage development of the poorest regions.

Another good example is the problem of counterfeit cigarettes or spare car parts, which can carry huge safety risks. Blocking the entry of these products to the EU is also a tangible way to improve consumer safety.

Q: OK, so now what are the next steps?

Well, now that the budgetary control committee has adopted basically all of my recommendations, the report needs to be voted on by the European Parliament as a whole, which should happen on 8/9 March.

Since almost all MEPs in the committee voted for the report (except for one Front National MEP - who seems to talk about corruption but then votes against progressive measures to fight it), I think this is a strong and clear signal for the plenary to also adopt the report and work openly to enhance the fight against fraud and corruption in the EU.

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Benedek Jávor

Former Member

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Pam Bartlett Quintanilla

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