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Time to guarantee ethics and integrity in the EU

Ending conflicts of interest

A new political term is a new chance to upgrade the EU's ethics systems to make sure any risks of conflicts of interest or corruption are completely stamped out. In a Union that is under constant attack, the best form of defence is to act with the highest standards of ethics, transparency and integrity.

It hasn't been easy but we've come a long way over the last political term, which started with conflicts of interests scandals caused by former Commissioners moving straight into lobbying jobs, while incoming Commissioners like Miguel Arias Cañete had shares in oil-related companies at the same time he was vying for a top job as Commissioner for Climate Action.

We vowed to stop these types of scandals, so we worked to reform the way in which Commissioners are appointed. Now, the European Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee will first have to scan their declarations of interest and confirm that no conflicts of interest exist before the Commissioner-candidates can move on to the next stage in the process. This gives the European Parliament a strong new blocking power that it can exercise this autumn, when the procedure for appointing the new EU Commissioners starts.

Following the 'Barroso-gate scandal' prompted by José Manuel Barroso's decision to swing through the revolving doors from the head of the European Commission to Goldman Sachs - the toxic consultancy blamed by many for the Eurozone crisis - the European Commission finally ceded to public pressure from MEPs, EU civil servants and civil society and prolonged its 'cooling-off-period' from 18 months to two years for EU Commissioners and to three years for the EU Commission President.

The Commission also 're-vamped' it's ad-hoc ethics committee and started to publish annual reports on how it was functioning, as well as a list of Commissioners that had moved from public service into private roles. But it failed to come up with a meaningful reform that would guarantee that the ethical experts were all truly independent and that they would be able to initiate inquiries proactively.

This is why we are demanding that in this term a new independent ethics body be created to oversee conflicts of interest in all the EU institutions. This body should have the power to proactively scan the declarations of interest, initiate investigations and make binding recommendations.

This body is also essential for the European Parliament, as MEPs should not be tasked with judging other MEPs and it is imperative that MEPs are also free from any conflicts of interest. Again, in the previous term we managed to improve the ethics rules in many respects - for example by banning MEPs from having second jobs as lobbyists, or by obliging them to be more specific about how much they are earning on the side in other roles - but there is still a lot that should be improved in the next term.

A key obstacle that we faced in the last term was the argument that MEPs had an inviolable “freedom of the mandate” which meant that we could not regulate much about what they do. This has to stop. There should be much stricter rules on MEPs’ side-jobs, especially since working as an MEP is a full-time job and they should always be working in the public interest.

There should also be rules to control the ‘revolving door’, so that MEPs are not selling their knowledge and contacts to the highest bidder as soon as they leave office - this is an initiative that is also being pushed in the USA at the moment, with bipartisan support. Hopefully the new European Parliament will support our proposals, which were actually withdrawn from the vote in the last term, as then-EP President Schulz decided they were “inadmissible”.

In addition, the European Parliament needs to be much stricter on how MEPs are spending taxpayers’ money. The €4513 that MEPs receive every month for office expenses cannot be treated as a blank cheque. The Greens/EFA Group has led the way by adopting rules on our GEA expenditure, but in the next term, whole Parliament needs to follow. In March this year, just before the EU elections, we managed to get a majority to agree with us that more control of this money is urgently needed, but now it remains to be seen if this new Parliament will stick to those promises.

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