Recommendations for reform of European Parliament’s rules on transparency, integrity, accountability and anti-corruption

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The Special Committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, and the strengthening of integrity, transparency and accountability in the European Parliament adopted the joint report by Vladimír BILÍK (EPP, SK) and Nathalie LOISEAU (Renew Europe, FR) on recommendations for reform of European Parliament’s rules on transparency, integrity, accountability and anti-corruption.

Context

Ongoing investigations led by the Belgian authorities have uncovered suspicions of an extremely worrying system of corruption, money laundering and participation in a criminal organisation involving, to date, three sitting Members of the European Parliament and one former Member as well as one accredited parliamentary assistant. These suspicions relate to influence from Qatar and Morocco. Moreover, there are allegations that other states, such as Mauritania, may also be involved.

Citizens’ trust in the integrity and independence of European institutions is the foundation of the European political system, which is particularly vulnerable in the run-up to elections. If foreign actors undermine citizens’ trust in EU institutions, it can affect the democratic functioning of the EU. Corruption has significant financial consequences and constitutes a serious threat to democracy, the rule of law and public investment.

General observations

Members denounced the alleged attempts by Qatar and Morocco to influence Members, former Members and Parliament staff through acts of corruption, which constitute serious foreign interference in the EU’s democratic processes. They are committed to working at all levels to strengthen the rules and culture on integrity, transparency and accountability in Parliament and called for stronger measures to address all potential conflicts of interest. The need for solidarity between the Member States and the EU institutions is needed to be able to fight effectively against this type of activity.

The committee insisted that potential loopholes in the institutions’ rules and procedures that allow unlawful behaviour need to be systematically identified and thoroughly closed by effective reforms and control capacities; highlights that some current mechanisms need to be reviewed with the aim of preventing conflicts of interest, enhancing transparency, and preventing, deterring and detecting foreign interference and corruption.

Code of Conduct

The report called for a rapid conclusion of the revision of the Code of Conduct for Members with a view to introducing rules on whistleblowers that are in step with the European standards set in the Whistleblower Directive. Members reiterated their opinion that a declaration of assets by Members before and after their term of office would provide additional safeguards in the fight against corruption.

Reinforcing the security culture within Parliament

Members called for mandatory, proper and regular training on security, interference, ethical standards, compliance and integrity for all Members and their offices and for all Parliament staff, making them aware that they are potential targets of foreign state and non-state actors.

As regards private contractors, particular attention should be paid to companies owned by non-EU companies or states, such as Russia and China.

Access to Parliament buildings by visitors, including representatives of non-EU countries, lobbyists and NGOs, should be controlled more strictly.

Relations with non-EU countries and entities: official missions, trips and friendship groups

Missions to non-EU countries can be used as an opportunity to exert undue influence on Members, therefore, the committee recalled that mandatory, dedicated security briefings focused on foreign interference risks, tailored to the destination country, should be given to Members before any missions.

While recalling the importance of election observation missions in providing relevant information and issuing specific recommendations to make the electoral system more resilient and help counter foreign interference in electoral processes, Members consider that Parliament should bar unauthorised, unofficial election observation by individual Members.

Stricter rules should be put in place for trips by officials which are paid for by foreign countries and entities. Members suggested **limiting the threshold for gifts** to Members to EUR 100.

Integrity of parliamentary work

While recalling the importance of urgency resolutions as part of Parliament's action to protect human rights around the globe, Members denounced any attempts at interfering with them. A suitable amount of time should be allowed for their drafting to ensure due protection against external influence. It is recommended that the **resolutions** voted on by Parliament be accompanied by an annex containing a list of persons or institutions met by rapporteurs and shadow rapporteurs.

The report considers that it should be made compulsory for all Members to publish all scheduled meetings with third parties (interest representatives). Members and their offices should be required to declare meetings with diplomatic representatives of non-EU countries as well as with representatives of interests covered by the scope of the EU Transparency Register, with exceptions being allowed in cases where the naming of individuals or organisations would put individuals' lives or safety at risk.

The special committee insisted on the need for **transparency**, by means of registration in the EU Transparency Register, regarding the funding received by interest representatives, such as NGOs, think tanks and consultancy services, that wish to be involved with Parliament, in particular when they request support or sponsorship from Members for organising meetings on Parliament's premises, when they are invited to hearings, exchanges of views or any other scheduled appearances, or when they participate in a study or research on behalf of Parliament.

Members are of the opinion that the documents that are to be directly accessible through Parliament's public register should include preparatory legislative documents, such as political and technical **trilogue documents**, including all versions of the joint multi-column document referred to in the Code of Conduct for negotiating in the context of the ordinary legislative procedure.

Stronger action should be taken to enhance the protection of whistleblowers among staff members and accredited parliamentary assistants.

Cooperation with other EU and national institutions

Members reiterated the call for the swift establishment of an independent **EU ethics body** and committed to concluding interinstitutional negotiations by the end of 2023. The body's mandate should include scrutiny, on a case-by-case basis, of Members' and former Members' intentions to work for any non-EU government or any entity controlled by a non-EU government during their term of office or after the end of their term. Members are called on to uphold Parliament's values and standards and not accept employment by authoritarian, non-democratic governments or related state-owned entities after the end of their term.

The rules applying to former Members engaging in lobbying activities falling under the **Transparency Register** should be clarified. It is recommended that the ethics body be given appropriate investigative powers, including the ability to act on its own initiative, and the power to request administrative documents, while respecting the immunity of Members.

The special committee called on Member States and all the EU institutions to increase cooperation with the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust) and the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) and underlined the particular need to increase its own cooperation with these bodies. The EPPO's scope should be extended to the whole Union, which would facilitate its cooperation with other institutions and ensure better prosecution of cases in countries that do not currently participate in the EPPO.

The EU institutions are invited to work towards tighter internal regulations among the Member States regarding the use, servicing and procurement of spyware and surveillance tools and to assess the spyware and surveillance tools currently in use.

Lastly, Members insisted that the list of sanctionable activities for Members should be revised on the basis of this report.