

Opening remarks Transparency International EU Launch of studies on transparency, accountability and integrity

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Thank you Michiel.

Firstly, I would like to congratulate Transparency International for the three excellent studies published today following up on the 2014 studies, the launch of which I also had the pleasure to speak a few words at.

Let me first share my perspective on just one aspect of these issues and that is administrative transparency. In my view, the EU administration has too much control over the 'information tap'. Too often, it seems as if it is the administration – and not the citizen via their treaty based rights - that decides whether to turn the tap to full flow, reduce it to a trickle, or turn it off completely.

Last week the Commission decided that a more flowing transparency was in its interests when the row over the vaccine contract between it and AstraZeneca blew up. Suddenly transparency was the order of the day as a redacted version became public, the Commission using it to argue its contested case of bad faith against the pharmaceutical company.

At a press conference, the Commission stated that:

"Transparency and accountability are important to help build the trust of European citizens and to make sure that they can rely on the effectiveness and safety of the vaccines purchased at the EU level."

On the same day, in the German media, President von der Leyen demanded "transparency and planning security" from AstraZeneca and other vaccine companies.

Prior to this, my office has received several complaints relating to the transparency of the EU vaccine strategy and I have opened two inquiries into the matter. By the time of course the complaints come to me, they will already have been rejected in a two -stage process by the administration.

I will not prejudge my inquiries on these topics here, but if the Commission wanted more transparency in this area, in order, as it says, to increase public trust and confidence in the



vaccines, then presumably such transparency could have formed part of the negotiations with the pharmaceutical companies? It should not take a crisis for transparency to become an administrative virtue.

Regarding the pandemic in general, my office launched a series of inquiries and initiatives last July, looking at specific aspects of the response of the different EU institutions.

My office asked the Council, for example, about the use of temporary derogations from the standard rules of procedure during the crisis due to remote working. I also sent a list of questions to the Commission including questions regarding the transparency of vaccination contracts, which have now become the focus of much attention. We have encountered no rush by the Commission – similar to that of last week – to decide on how much information it wants to release from the tap in relation to many of those questions.

Another recent example of ‘information tap’ control emerged last week in a revealing two part documentary on the Council produced by the French Parliament’s TV Channel and featuring a behind-the-scenes look at the negotiations in the European Council during two critical summits last year. The President, Charles Michel, and his cabinet, featured very heavily and very flatteringly in the production.

The viewer gets what seems to be an inside look into high-level discussions on the climate emergency and on the response to the COVID-19 crisis. I say ‘seems’ because access and editorial freedom must have been controlled otherwise other media outlets could demand unlimited access to these traditionally closed -door events.

Who decided on the topics one might ask? Did the producers have access to any of the negotiating documents? Who signed off on the final version of the edit? Who authorised where cameras could be?

As someone whose office has, for many years, tried to convince the Council to open up, it was rather interesting to see what its big sibling, the European Council, was prepared to do when its own interests could be advanced by letting the cameras in even in a highly controlled way.

Nonetheless, the documentary did allow the public to see the type of negotiations and trade-offs that happen and the degree to which national leaders are intimately involved even in the small details of negotiations despite the ‘blame Brussels’ story they might sometimes tell their citizens.

Transparency should not be a vanity tool but rather a means of enforcing democratic accountability. We might have understood the vaccine row a bit more had we witnessed the discussions between the member states and the criticism of the Commission might have been a little more nuanced.

I will conclude by saying that the administration should learn the lessons of this pandemic, that public trust is not just vital to emerging from this tragedy, but it is sustained only by an honest accounting by the administration of what it is doing. In the context of the pandemic -



transparency can be quite literally, a matter of life or death.

If the EU wants to maintain citizens' trust and become more resilient in the years to come, it must continue to reinforce its legitimacy through the **consistent** and **reliable** use of accountability tools - such as transparency.

The Transparency International reports launched today identify many areas for improvement and are a good starting point for our work.

Thank you.