



How the European Commission deals with the provision by third parties of travel expenses and hospitality in the context of business trips

Case opened

Case SI/2/2023/KR - **Opened on** 03/03/2023 - **Institution concerned** European Commission |

Ms Ursula von der Leyen

President

European Commission

Dear President,

In the context of the ongoing corruption scandal involving current and former MEPs and non-EU countries, the role of third parties and how they seek to influence EU public officials, as you are aware, has come under renewed scrutiny.

I have already noted, in correspondence with the European Parliament (EP), that a scandal such as this is a gift to those who would wish to damage or disparage the entire EU. I will be following up with the EP on relevant administrative matters.

To maintain a high level of public trust, I have emphasised the need for strong ethics rules and robust transparency in the interactions between EU officials and interest representatives. I continue to monitor the EU administration in this respect.

I noted earlier this week [1] that the Director-General of the Commission's transport department (DG MOVE) travelled a number of times between 2015 and 2021 at the expense of the Qatari government or organisations that are close to it. [2] This was at the same time as DG MOVE was closely involved in negotiating the EU-Qatar air transport agreement [3], which was signed on 18 October 2021. The Qatari government and organisations close to it paying for travel expenses for DG MOVE's most senior official gives rise to legitimate questions around possible undue influence of the EU's decision-making in this area.



I also noted with concern the explanation from the Commission that since the Director-General was not part of the negotiating team, there was no conflict of interest in accepting the payment of his travel expenses by the Qatari government. The public may not draw this distinction, given that the Director-General ultimately takes the responsibility for these negotiations.

The Commission has now announced that it is tightening its rules concerning the subsidising by third parties of its business missions.

Whilst such missions may further the interest of the EU, it is of the utmost importance that these arrangements are scrutinised in order to manage the risks of conflicts of interest, whether real, potential or perceived.

I am committed to helping the EU institutions and bodies to improve their accountability, transparency and ethical frameworks. A strong ethics system must be an integral part of all EU institutions and bodies.

As such, I would be grateful if the Commission could reply to the questions in annex by 3-6-2023.

I thank you in advance for your kind cooperation.

Yours sincerely,

Emily O'Reilly European Ombudsman

Strasbourg, 03/03/2023

Annex

Questions for the Commission:

I. Transparency can pre-empt speculation on whether interactions with interest representatives serve the public interest, or not. Directors-General are obliged to make public the details about their interactions with organisations or self-employed individuals on issues relating to policy-making and implementation in the Union within a period of two weeks following the meeting. [4]

I note that the register of meetings held by the Director-General of DG MOVE does not refer to a number of conferences for which travel costs were paid for by third parties. [5] I also note that this may not be the only occasion where meetings involving this Director General are not recorded in the register. [6]



Could you therefore please describe the mechanism in place to check and ensure that Directors-General of the Commission make public information on all meetings held by them with organisations or self-employed individuals on issues relating to policy-making and implementation in the Union?

II. The Commission responded to media reports of the Director-General's missions paid for by third parties by saying that everything happened within the current rules. Could you therefore please detail the process through which these visits were authorised within the Commission?

III. Could you please provide the details of what changes are proposed as regards the authorisation of missions subsidised by third parties.

IV. Could you please confirm, and give details of, the number of cases in which travel and other costs related to missions undertaken by Commissioners and senior officials have been paid for by third parties in the years 2021, 2022 and 2023 to date?

[1] See:

<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-transport-chief-henrik-hololei-flew-free-qatar-airways-negotiate-aviation>

[2] See:

https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/24/2023-02-15_EASE-2023-0098-ANNEX-I83.pdf

[3] See: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_5344 .

[4] Commission Decision of 25 November 2014 on the publication of information on meetings held between Directors-General of the Commission and organisations or self-employed individuals, 2014/838/EU, Euratom: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2014/838/oj>

.

[5] For example the 59th Assembly of Presidents of the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines, as well as the 52nd and 54th Annual General Meeting of the Arab Air Carriers Organization (AACO). See:

<http://ec.europa.eu/transparencyinitiative/meetings/meeting.do?host=ed82401c-d412-44bd-bdbc-3d0c5>

[6] See:

<https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/politico-eu-influence/politico-eu-influence-presented-by-mcdonalds-c>

.