

The President

Ms Emily O'Reilly
European Ombudsman
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Dear Ms O'Reilly,

Thank you for your letter dated 20 March 2023, as well as for the correspondence and fruitful meetings that we have had in recent weeks regarding Parliament's plan for strengthening its integrity, independence, and accountability. I sincerely value your support, your interest and your input.

On 8 February 2023, the Conference of Presidents endorsed Parliament's "14-point reform plan". In recent weeks, a dedicated administrative task force has been paving the way for the adoption by the competent political bodies of the changes that will implement the reform plan into our internal legal framework. There are three main actors responsible for implementing the Conference of Presidents' mandate: the Bureau, the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO Committee) and the administrative services of the General Secretariat. In addition, 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 (ING2 Committee) has been given a renewed mandate, which will include assessing the possible shortcomings in our relations with third countries.

The Bureau adopted the new decision regarding Former Members (point 1) on 17 April 2023. This will be followed by a new decision on access to Parliament's premises (point 6), new conditionality rules for participation of lobbyists in events held in Parliament (point 3) and, once the relevant consultations have been carried out, new rules on internal whistleblowing (point 10).

The AFCO Committee has started to work on all measures that entail changes to the Rules of Procedure and its Annex I (Code of Conduct). AFCO should establish a report including points 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, and 14. The Committee's ambitious timeline began at the Coordinators meeting on 22 March 2023. Following the routine procedures, subject to public view, the Committee aims to end its work in June 2023, so that Parliament can vote on the report during its July part-session.

All administrative services are getting ready for the immediate implementation and application of the new upcoming rules. Moreover, they will do the necessary for the points that require no changes to our legal framework, such as an awareness campaign on new mandatory transparency practices by Members, with a reminder system (e.g. under the introductory point), or the creation and regular update of the webpage "integrity tab" by our IT services (under point 2). The Secretary-General is in agreement with the prioritisation that Parliament has given to this reform. In addition, our reform should be legally robust, which is why the Legal Service is assessing this reform in view of existing obligations stemming from the Treaties and secondary legislation, notably the Statute for Members.

As a general disclaimer, while I can share with you the below information, the reform process is ongoing and a detailed reply to all of your questions will only be possible once all the relevant acts have been adopted.

Once the Bureau decision on Former Members starts to apply, the Directorate-General for Security and Safety will ensure that Former Members are entitled to daily access to Parliament so long as they do not engage in lobbying activities. If they do so, they will have to use a lobbyist badge, following registration with the Transparency Register, and only after a cooling-off period of six months. Non-compliance with this rule will lead to withdrawal of all access rights.

A substantially strengthened Advisory Committee should assume a proactive role in signalling certain situations to the President. The exact details of this stronger mandate will be determined by the upcoming amendment of the Code of Conduct through the AFCO process. In order to reinforce the system further, the proposed amendment to Rule 176 of the Rules of Procedure should be explicit on the possibility of imposing sanctions in this area and a more widespread use of sanctions should ultimately make the procedure more transparent. The impartiality of the Advisory Committee is guaranteed by its politically balanced composition, the safeguarding measures for the appointment of rapporteurs and the chairperson, among other provisions included in the implementing rules of the Code of Conduct.

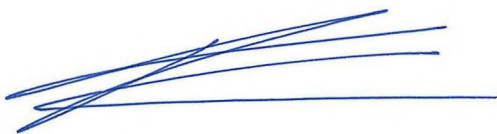
Another central element of the plan should be increased transparency obligations for Members. There would be more detailed declarations of financial interests, the format of which is to be determined by the Bureau following the amendment of the Code of Conduct. There should be additional disclosure obligations in the context of conflicts of interest, as well as a wider scope for the mandatory declaration of meetings. The latter should cover not only rapporteurs but also Members with an active role, Accredited Parliamentary Assistants and other relevant staff. This should apply to organisations that follow the Transparency Register rules as well as representatives of third countries.

Across the board, Parliament's services will be in charge of monitoring compliance with these new measures (including the new revolving door policy, mandatory declaration of meetings, checks on declarations on financial interests, and the ban on friendship groups with third countries). The specific service responsible for monitoring compliance will depend on each measure. The details of the organisational measures and the determination of the services in charge will be incumbent upon the Secretary-General. Enforcement will ultimately be guaranteed by a broader framework of sanctions that will include new penalties; such as the removal of access rights, the dissolution of entities under Rule 35, or restrictions in terms of rapporteurships.

This reform has attracted considerable attention from the media and the public. Although these initial measures are internal in nature, a number of stakeholders have provided very valuable insights and we have been actively looking for inspiration as to how other institutions, Member States, and even third countries protect themselves against vulnerabilities relating to corruption. Gaining insight from external stakeholders will continue, particularly in the context of the amendments to the Rules of Procedure; but these are just the first steps of a wider reform, which will entail a longer time for reflection and broader consultations.

Let me reiterate that your support in this reform is greatly appreciated. I think highly of your leading role in holding the EU institutions accountable and promoting good administration. This reform process is stronger with you at our side.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several overlapping, fluid strokes that form a cursive script.

Roberta Metsola