



Will The Fallout From “Qatargate” Splatter The European Commission?

Description

Authored by Nick Corbishley via NakedCapitalism.com,

As the Qatargate scandal widens, questions are being asked as to whether its reverberations will reach the Commission, the EU’s executive branch. Recent revelations suggest the EU’s Chief Diplomat Josep Borrell could be implicated.

Since erupting last weekend with police raids on MEPs’ homes and offices in the European parliament, the Qatargate scandal has done nothing but mushroom. What began as a criminal probe into current and former MEPs and parliamentary assistants implicated in a bribery ring aimed at burnishing the public image of the current World Cup host has widened significantly — not only in terms of the number of people involved but also the number of organizations and third countries, which now also include Morocco.

As the scandal grows, both the Parliament and the European Commission are locked in a frantic damage control mission. European Parliament president Roberta Metsola on Thursday (15 December) pledged to unveil a “wide-ranging reform package” in January, which will include measures to bolster whistleblower protections, a ban on all unofficial parliamentary friendship groups (groups of MEPs discussing relations with non-EU countries) and a review of enforcement of code of conduct rules for MEPs.

Fallout Spreads

For the moment almost all of the focus is understandably on the European Parliament, but questions are beginning to be asked as to whether the fallout will spread to the EU’s executive branch, the European Commission. Asked whether he is worried about such an outcome, Didier Reynders, the EU Commissioner for justice, [told Politico](#) that it is “all the time a possibility”.

Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen, herself no stranger to corruption allegations, both in her native Germany and in Brussels, [said](#) the following in a Monday morning press conference:

The allegations against the VP of Parliament [Eva Kaili] are of the most concern, very serious. It's a question of confidence of our people in our institutions, it needs highest standards. I proposed the creation of an independent ethnics body that covers all EU institutions (in March).[1] For us it is very critical to have not only strong rules, but the same rules covering *all* the EU institutions, and not to allow for any exemptions.

Von der Leyen added that the Commission is looking at its own transparency register for all logged meetings between staff and Qatari officials. That is not as comforting as it may sound given the flagrant disregard for transparency and accountability her Commission has shown in its acquisition of billions of COVID-19 vaccines.

What's more, as the non-profit research and campaign group Corporate Europe Observatory [notes](#), the Commission's 2014 transparency reforms apply only to the top 250 most senior officials in the Commission. Many lower level officials from among the 30,000+ Commission staff regularly meet with lobbyists but they are not included within the rules.

EU's Biggest Corruption Scandal in Years

Von der Leyen also refused to answer questions about the European Vice President Margaritis Schinas' connections with Qatar, provoking umbrage from the Brussels press corps. Margaritis, also from Greece, represented the EU at the opening ceremony of the World Cup, and has been heavily criticized for lavishing praise on the "improving" labor conditions in Qatar, where at least 6,500 migrants workers from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan died between 2011, the year the World Cup was awarded to the country, and 2020.

Politico describes Qatargate as the biggest corruption scandal to hit the EU in years, though it faces a run for its money from the blossoming scandal over the Commission's deeply opaque dealings with Pfizer and other vaccine makers, which is now the subject of an investigation by the European Public Prosecutor's Office. The EU's ombudsman Emily O'Reilly branded the Commission's refusal to disclose the text messages between von der Leyen and Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla as "maladministration."

In contrast to Qatargate, that scandal has been studiously ignored by Europe's legacy media despite the staggering sums of money involved (tens of billions of dollars to date to buy up to 1.8 billion COVID-19 vaccines), the number of people affected (anyone who pays taxes in the EU and felt compelled by the EU's vaccine passport rules to take a medical product they didn't want) and the seniority of those implicated, including Von der Leyen herself and Albert Bourla, CEO of Pfizer, one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies.

Von der Leyen herself has come under fire for concealing and/or deleting records of her conversations with Bourla prior to the Commission's purchase of up to 1.8 billion vaccines. As for Bourla, he has

twice refused to give testimony to a European Parliament special committee on the matter.

Borrell in the Mix?

For his part, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy Josep Borrell described Qatargate "very, very worrisome." But he was also at pains to emphasize that no one in the European Commission's diplomatic service, which he heads, is under investigation: "There is nothing and no one being referred to neither from the External Action Service nor from the delegations."

But that may change in the coming days or weeks. Former European Parliament Vice President Eva Kaili, who is at the center of the bribery allegations, denies receiving the €1.5 million of cash found at her home and in her father's possession [2] and claims she was acting exclusively on orders from above. According to Kaili's lawyer, Michalis Dimitrakopoulos, those orders came directly from EU Parliament President Roberta Metsola and Borrell.



From *Euractiv*:

In an interview with Greek MEGA TV channel, Dimitrakopoulos said Kaili has nothing to do with bribery from Qatar.

“What the public opinion needs to know is that Qatar did not need to bribe Ms Kaili because she went to Qatar as a representative of the European Parliament, the speeches, the interviews she gave were after the agreement and order of the President Roberta Metsola,” Dimitrakopoulos said.

He added that documents prove this and explained that Kaili did not take any initiative or have an agenda.

“Ms Metsola sent her to Qatar, what she was going to say had Ms Metsola’s approval [...] Ms Metsola had also sent EU official Mr Roberto Bendini with her to watch all of Ms Kaili’s meetings”, he explained.

“I am telling you the words of Ms Kaili, she was carrying out a plan that had started in 2019, High Representative Josep Borrell and Ylva Johansson [Commissioner for Home Affairs] had decided at the Commission level, to cooperate with Qatar, Kuwait and Oman,” the lawyer added.

For the moment, these are just leaked allegations made by the lawyer of a suspect in a very serious corruption investigation, and should be treated as such. But one thing that is clear is that Borrell, as Europe’s chief diplomat, played a leading role in forging closer ties with Qatar.

MEPs now suspect Qatar’s palm-greasing may have unduly influenced negotiations on the highly lucrative EU-Qatar aviation agreement. Signed last year, the deal granted Qatar Airlines unlimited access to the EU’s vast market of 450 million people while giving European airlines access to Qatar’s somewhat smaller market of 2.9 million people. The first deal of its kind ever to be signed by the Commission, it was heavily criticised by major EU airlines and unions, but defended by the EU, which claimed it would provide “opportunities for both sides.” An EU spokesperson said on Wednesday the agreement was reached with “full transparency.”

In the end, Europe’s desperate hunger for energy sources, which was already readily apparent even by the summer of 2021, probably played a much larger part in securing the deal than a few greased palms. On his first visit to the country as EU’s chief diplomat, in September 2021, Borrell praised Qatar as a “reliable energy partner”, which in these times, he said, is “especially important.” He also announced EU plans to build a fully fledged diplomatic mission in Doha this year, which was inaugurated in September.

As previously mentioned, Morocco is also implicated in this ever-widening scandal. [According to](#) Spanish journalist Ignacio Cembrero, it is the country’s foreign intelligence services, the DGED, that has been bribing MEPs, presumably to frustrate any resolutions in favor of Western Sahara, the resource-rich former Spanish colony it invaded and occupied in 1975. Morocco has also been accused this year of using Pegasus spyware to target the mobile phones of around 200 Spanish government officials, including the Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and then Defense Minister Margarita Robles.

Regular readers may recall that over the last year the North African country has garnered increasing support for its “autonomy” plan for Western Sahara among big hitters in the EU including Germany,

the Netherlands and Spain. The plan would essentially involve formalizing Morocco's permanent occupation of the resource-rich region and has already received the blessing of both Israel and the US.

Another Toothless Ethics Body

For the moment, it is far from clear just how far this burgeoning scandal will reach. One thing that *is* clear is that the reputational damage will be large and lasting. The European Union's ability to lecture the misbehaving governments of Member States and third-party countries on how to govern will be further diminished.

As Hungary's Victor Orban said in a video uploaded to his Facebook page, "It is time that we drain the swamp here in Brussels."

And he is right. EU institutions need to get their house in order once and for all, and fast. And that is unlikely to happen. The EU ombudsman Emily O'Reilly said this week that Von der Leyen's proposed plan for a new ethics body is likely to end up as "something with no teeth, something that will possibly sit there passively, wait for complaints to come in."

What the body really needs, O'Reilly said, is investigatory and sanctions powers. But that might actually threaten to derail the gravy train Brussels has become.

And the problem is not just illegal cash payments stuffed away in paper bags and briefcases; it is the vast lobbying apparatus that has built up in Brussels, which is now the second largest lobbying capital in the world after Washington. As in Washington, lobbying reaches into just about every aspect of governance. In its 2015 report, CEO reported that lobbyists representing businesses and trade associations made up 75% of all high-level Commission lobby meetings and more than 80% in certain areas such as financial regulation or the internal market.

The inevitable result, as in Washington, is that policies are made almost exclusively in the service of vested corporate interests. Sometimes corporate lobbies even draft the EU's legislation. This *is* the business model of modern governance.

Lastly, if Borrell is indeed caught up in this burgeoning scandal and, by some miracle, loses his job, it would be no great loss to the EU's 450 million citizens. He is the least diplomatic of diplomats. Just about every time he speaks, whether on the wonders of European colonialism or the vast untamed jungle that lies beyond Europe's borders, damage is inflicted on the EU's relations with some other part of the world. Since long before the Ukraine conflict he has played a leading role in escalating tensions with Russia, the EU's biggest neighbor and energy supplier.

He is also no stranger to scandal, having been convicted, in 2018, of insider trading in Spain. That resulted in him being placed on the Spanish market regulator's blacklist. The ensuing scandal triggered calls for his resignation as Spain's then-Foreign Minister. But he resisted those calls and in 2020 was bumped up to the European Commission, as so often happens with scandal-tarnished domestic politicians in the EU.

by Tyler Durden

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Date Created

12/20/2022