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A glimmer of light in the EU Council's black box?

Vitor Teixeira · Wednesday, February 12th, 2020

EU lobby transparency has long been a topic that is high on the agenda for campaign groups, politicians, the media, and citizens. The patchy approach at EU level has left it at risk of undue influence and subject to 'black box decision making'. That being said, recently the most secretive institution, the EU Council, specifically some Permanent Representations, appear to have taken a step towards the light.

For background, the European Commission and the European Parliament have been running a voluntary transparency register since 2011. The Commission has been publishing lobby meetings with high-level officials since 2015, and the Parliament [adopted its first lobby transparency rules](#) in 2019, requiring Rapporteurs, Shadow Rapporteurs and Committee Chairs to publish their meetings online. The EU Council and Permanent Representations have never been a part of the voluntary Transparency Register and keeping their meetings away from the public eye, but some have recently started to publish their meetings following pressure from civil society and citizens

In 2015, the Dutch Permanent Representation became the first to disclose who their [Permanent Representative and Deputy Permanent Representative were meeting during their Presidency](#). This was a big step forward, but the momentum fizzled out and other Perm Reps decided against publishing in the Presidencies following the Dutch mandate.

Seeing the lack of momentum and political will to publish lobby meetings, Transparency International EU has worked with Permanent Representations to encourage increased transparency as it was being adopted by other institutions.

Following the Romanian Perm Rep [publishing their lobby meetings](#), a second breakthrough came during the Finnish Presidency of the EU in 2019, who put transparency as a [top priority](#) for their six month term. They also [published details](#) of meetings between Finnish Ministers and interest groups and lobbyists.

These steps ultimately led to the formal trio of Presidencies (Member States holding the Presidency work together closely in groups of three, called 'trios') publishing their meetings, as the [Croatian](#) Presidency also started to disclose the information. This is the first trio of Presidencies ever to put their meetings online, a clear signal that lobby transparency is a long-term goal of the 18-month period.

Following Croatia, Germany will take up the Presidency between July and December 2020 and the Perm Rep has already started to [publish its meetings](#). The big question is whether all of the members of the next trio will all take up this good practice.

A mention should also be given to the Italian Perm Rep, who recently committed to greater transparency and began disclosing lobby meeting information [here](#).

The long-fraught negotiations for a mandatory transparency register of all three institutions are still stalled. Could this move by Perm Reps signal a move towards an unblocking? Only time will tell, but one thing remains clear, as long as black-box decision making is allowed to continue in the EU, citizen participation in politics and trust in our institutions will remain low.

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