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Free Pass? Oettinger's easy ride at the European Parliament

Yannik Bendel · Tuesday, January 10th, 2017

On a dreary January evening Members of the European Parliament had the chance to question Commissioner Günther Oettinger on his recent racist, homophobic remarks and undeclared meeting with a Kremlin-linked lobbyist. But the dreariness of the grey Brussels night sky seemed to infect the MEPs' ability to truly probe the man who will be in charge of the EU's budget and Human Resources, following the departure of Kristalina Georgieva to the World Bank. After the meeting most spectators left the room feeling that this was a missed opportunity. But this was not the final word on the matter as heated discussion now continues internally to come up with a joint position on the final verdict to be submitted to the Commission.

The meeting had been eagerly awaited by many as an opportunity to question Oettinger on his appointment – especially after President Juncker had put him in place as of January 1st without properly consulting the European Parliament beforehand. However, rather than a grilling, yesterday's two and half hour "exchange of views" turned out to be a slow-cooking exercise at very low temperatures. MEPs from different groups missed out on the opportunity to question Oettinger beyond his clearly well-prepped replies and to find out more about the man who will be running the Commission's budget and HR portfolio for the next two years.

While Commission Oettinger showed a solid performance on issues related to the Budget portfolio, he struggled with questions related to Human Resources and his recent scandals. His line of defence to point to his track-record with his previous staff lacked any concrete new proposals for this area. In fact, his suggestion to clarify some issues around "grey areas" with regards to the definition of lobbying and current reporting rules for Commissioners showed once again his lack of understanding and political sensitivity on these issues.

Ahead of the "hearing" Transparency International EU together with other NGOs all working on different areas [wrote a letter](#) highlighting some of the open questions and obvious contradictions from Juncker's personnel choice.

This is not about political correctness, but about the integrity of the political leadership and accountability of the European Commission. To put Oettinger in charge of Human Resources, just weeks after being embroiled in scandals and amid discussions about the reform of the Commission's own ethics regime brings into question the Commission's commitment to live up to its own rhetoric. At the beginning of this Commission term President Juncker made some positive noises about the integrity, transparency and accountability of the EU's executive. Is it

worth putting the legacy of “the most transparent Commission ever” on the line for the sake of political posturing, when this could be solved by not placing the HR portfolio under Oettinger?

However, discussions are on-going. The Committee coordinators now have to agree on a joint recommendation to the Conference of Presidents by 12th of January. But there is difference of opinions between the political groups on the next steps. While the S&D and Green groups agree that Oettinger should not be promoted and placed in charge of Human Resources, we’ve yet to see similar commitments from other groups. During their drafting of joint recommendations around Oettinger’s promotion, MEPs still have the chance to send a strong signal to the Commission to show some responsiveness to citizens’ concerns.

We at Transparency International EU call on the Commission, for the sake of its integrity and the image of the wider EU, not to give Oettinger the HR portfolio. This simple step would demonstrate a commitment by the Commission to try to live up to its claims of ethical leadership.

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