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NGOs condemn MEP's side activities in complaint on conflict-of-interest risk

Pia Engelbrecht-Bogdanov · Thursday, June 29th, 2023

The following complaint was sent on 28 June 2023 by Transparency International EU and the undersigned organisations. Read it in full [here](#).

Corporate Europe Observatory, Transparency International EU, Friends of the Earth Europe and LobbyControl have today written to European Parliament President Roberta Metsola to raise concerns about potential conflicts of interest regarding Member of the European Parliament Axel Voss. Mr. Voss, whose parliamentary activity is specifically focused on matters related to data protection and artificial intelligence, performs two paid side jobs for firms with an appreciable interest in Mr. Voss's field of political work.

According to his [declaration of financial interests](#), Mr. Voss earns up to €6000 a month for activities outside his political mandate: he is a freelancer at the law firm Bietmann Rechtsanwälte Steuerberater, [working on](#) data protection law, as well as a member of the data protection advisory board at German telecommunications giant Deutsche Telekom.

These outside financial interests overlap blatantly with Mr. Voss's political work. He is the rapporteur for the European Parliament Committee on Legal Affairs (JURI) Opinion on the Artificial Intelligence Act, as well as a Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee shadow rapporteur on the same proposal. His JURI Opinion makes additional references to data protection and [proposes](#) the President of the European Telecommunications Standards Institute, of which Deutsche Telekom is a [member](#), as a "permanent observer" to the proposed European Artificial Intelligence Board. Mr. Voss was also previously the rapporteur on a European Parliament report on "[Artificial Intelligence in a Digital Age](#)", for which he apparently held [two meetings](#) with Deutsche Telekom, as well as with other industry lobby groups of which Deutsche Telekom is a member. The meetings with Deutsche Telekom have since [disappeared](#) from his online declaration. Mr. Voss further [held](#) a meeting with a PR firm affiliated with Bietmann Rechtsanwälte Steuerberater in his work as shadow rapporteur on the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive.

The above facts raise critical questions concerning the influence of Mr. Voss's (substantially) paid side activities on his work on pivotal EU legislation. Citizens must have total confidence that legislation that affects them is being made in the public interest. Mr. Voss's potential conflicts of interest show that such reassurance cannot be granted by European policymakers.

Yet again, this has exposed the European Parliament's lax approach to transparency and accountable policymaking. There is no limit on the number of paid side activities an MEP can perform, and MEPs are not required to provide precise details on how much they earn, specific information about the topics they work on, or their clients. Vetting of these activities is non-existent.

The Parliament should now finally show a true commitment to safeguarding political integrity by stamping out both potential and actual conflicts of interest—through banning problematic side jobs. An MEP's sole focus should be their democratic electoral mandate, not outside interests.

We approached Mr. Voss regarding the concerns set out above, but by the time this press release was issued, he had not responded.

Shari Hinds of Transparency International EU said: *"Today's revelations are yet more evidence that such side activities should be banned. Members should be unimpeachable; these kinds of side jobs put a question mark on who MEPs are representing: are they working on behalf of EU citizens, or their clients? It is imperative that the Code of Conduct for Members be reformed to address these critical situations. Yet the reforms are being discussed behind closed doors. MEPs must demonstrate that they are taking integrity seriously and discuss Code of Conduct reforms publicly."*

Vicky Cann of Corporate Europe Observatory said: *"Six months on from Qatargate, the public expects that conflict of interest risks such as those of Mr. Voss are urgently investigated. President Metsola must act, and be seen to act."*

Paul de Clerck of Friends of the Earth Europe said: *"The integrity of an MEP should never be up for grabs. This should automatically imply that they refuse any form of work or remuneration from companies or organisations with a vested interest in their decision-making roles. In light of Qatargate, we urge EP President Metsola to end these types of conflicts of interest in the European Parliament by banning such side hustles."*

Verena Leyendecker of LobbyControl said: *"For many years, anti-corruption NGOs have been complaining to the President's office about MEPs with problematic side jobs – but we have yet to*

see any consequences or changes made. This shows that not only the rules, but also the system of control and enforcement, lacks teeth.”

Please direct press enquiries to EUPress@transparency.org

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