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Transparency International EU: Watered-down EU ethics body lacks credibility

Pia Engelbrecht-Bogdanov · Thursday, June 8th, 2023

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The EU ethics body proposed by the European Commission today would not be able to clean up the mess left by Qatargate.

In 2019, European Commission President von der Leyen said: “If Europeans are to have faith in our Union, its institutions should be open and beyond reproach on ethics, transparency and integrity. I will support the creation of an independent ethics body common to all EU institutions.” But nothing happened.

Four years later, the biggest corruption scandal ever to hit the EU institutions, Qatargate, highlighted once again the inability of the EU institutions to police themselves and the urgent need for independent external oversight. President von der Leyen repeated her promise to create an EU ethics body common to all EU institutions. And then nothing happened.

Today the Commission has finally tabled its proposal, and it’s a far cry from what was expected or promised. Instead of a body that proactively monitors integrity across the institutions and investigates alleged breaches of ethics rules, what we are left with is a toothless talking shop, without any power to investigate or sanction.

The role of the independent experts in the proposal is only advisory – the body needs to have an independent Chair. The system is based on self-assessment – but we know self-policing doesn’t work.

Transparency International EU (TI EU) welcomes the aim of harmonising ethics standards across the European institutions. This will force the Parliament in particular to raise its game. But

standards are futile if they are not properly implemented and enforced, and today's proposal once more leaves enforcement in the hands of the institutions themselves. We need a body with full investigative powers, and the institutions can deliver that when they negotiate this proposed agreement.

Nicholas Aiossa, Deputy Director and Head of Policy and Advocacy at TI EU, said *“This proposed ethics body reinforces the EU’s business-as-usual, self-policing approach to misconduct. Implementing far-reaching ethics reform should be a top priority ahead of the European elections taking place in a year’s time. If the EU is to be serious about combatting corruption within its own ranks, it must ensure that any independent oversight body has the power and resources to investigate and sanction members engaged in wrongdoing.”*

TI EU believes the EU institutions cannot afford to wait for an ethics body to come into effect before putting their own house in order. The European Parliament in particular should immediately overhaul the Code of Conduct for MEPs, including regulation of side activities, post-mandate employment, meetings with lobbyists and corruption prevention mechanisms.

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