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The global coalition against corruption

Under the influence: call for an investigation in the European Parliament

Alessandro · Tuesday, December 11th, 2018

Authoritarian governments meddling with elections and institutions of liberal democracies has been a major talking point for governments and citizens alike across the globe over the past couple of years. One high-profile case is [the investigation of Paul Manafort](#), whose indictment offers a glimpse into a multi-million dollar campaign to lobby the EU on behalf of the former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. Another is the [allegations of Russian influence](#) in the Brexit Leave Campaign. Both of these cases have been splashed across our front pages for months.

There is however another case of foreign influence that involves European institutions, which has still not been fully investigated. This is the [Azerbaijani Laundromat](#).

The story began just over a year ago, when a group of investigative journalists published their discovery of a €2.5 billion slush fund that was being run out of Azerbaijan. The fund was being used to launder the reputation of Azerbaijan, particularly its [woeful human rights record](#), in multiple EU member states and in international institutions such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe.

The story contained a number of allegations about the behaviour of members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which led to an independent investigation that corroborated many of these claims. The investigation ended with a [resolution](#) being passed by PACE with a number of recommendations to avoid this happening in the future. This week, three former members of PACE, one Italian and two Azeris, are [on trial in Milan](#). They stand accused of corruption to manipulate the Council of Europe. This trial is the only step that has been taken to hold anyone criminally accountable so far, despite numerous accusations of bribery across Europe.

PACE has not been the only gathering of Parliamentarians to be [targeted by the Azeri regime](#). Members of the European Parliament were also invited to the country by organisations close to the Azeri government. The European Parliament's Advisory Committee did investigate this and found that seven MEPs were in breach of the Code of Conduct, however, none were sanctioned at the time.

The PACE resolution, passed following the investigation, calls upon the European Parliament to also conduct an independent investigation and to draw on its recommendations and improve procedures according to the outcomes and findings. From what we can see this has still not been done and there is no evidence that it is being prepared.

Such an investigation could also review the safeguards the Parliament has in place to protect itself from undue influence more generally, and to overhaul the systems it has for protecting its integrity. We conducted [such an assessment in 2014](#) but we are unaware of any assessment by Parliament itself of how to deal with corruption risks. Given the prevalent public concern about the documented attempts of authoritarian governments round the world to undermine democratic elections and institutions, and the upcoming European elections, such a review would be very timely. It is important for us to also highlight that conducting such a review is one of the European Parliament's commitments under the UN Convention Against Corruption, which the European Union ratified in 2008. There has been no progress on this for the past decade, despite calling on the EU numerous times to get the ball rolling.

You can read the full letter that has been sent to the European Parliament today [here](#).

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