

Qatargate six months on: lots of talk, little action

On Friday 9 December 2022 the Brussels bubble was shaken by the news that European Parliament Vice-President Eva Kaili and others had been arrested, following a months-long investigation into alleged bribery and corruption at the heart of EU decision-making. In response, European Parliament President Metsola said: "There will be no impunity. (...) There will be no sweeping under the carpet. (...) There will be no business as usual. (...) We will shake up this Parliament and this town and I need your help to do it." On 15 December the Parliament adopted a strongly-worded resolution calling for sweeping internal reforms. In January 2023, President Metsola presented a 14-point reform plan, watering down some of the December plenary pledges but still promising important changes to the way the EP functions. This reform plan was formally endorsed by the Conference of Presidents on 8 February.

Six months on, the Parliament has little to show for its efforts. While there has been limited progress in a number of areas, no steps have been taken to tackle the culture of impunity that was allowed to develop over many years. Every serious attempt to improve accountability is blocked by the Parliament's ruling Bureau, with the acquiescence of political groups and MEPs. Not a single measure has been taken that impacts sitting MEPs.

Apart from the work of the special committee, the entire reform process is taking place behind closed doors. There is no transparency or accountability. For instance, the revision of the MEP Code of Conduct has been delegated to a secretive MEP working group, instead of being debated publicly in the full Constitutional Affairs Committee (AFCO).

This table tracks the key promises that were made, and the extent to which they have been fulfilled.

Legend

- No progress
- Insufficient progress
- Reform implemented

	Thematic area	What was promised	What has been delivered	Our recommendation
European Parliament				
	Overall reform process	A "special committee" (as defined by EP rules) will be set up, tasked with identifying flaws in the integrity system of the Parliament and corresponding rules on transparency.	The promise of a special committee was quietly shelved. Instead, the mandate of the ING2 committee on foreign interference has been extended to also cover transparency and integrity.	We would have liked to see a dedicated committee, but we are satisfied with the extended mandate of ING2. However, the initial draft report falls far short of reform expectations. There is plenty of scope for improvement via plenary amendments.
	Revolving doors	There will be a "cooling-off period" of up to two years for former MEPs before they can lobby their former colleagues.	A cooling-off period of six months was introduced by the EP's ruling Bureau.	A six-month cooling-off period is so short as to be almost <u>meaningless</u> . Very little happens in the first six months of a new parliamentary mandate. There's very little legislative activity. Six months is window-dressing; the period should last up to 24 months, in line with the duration of former

				MEPs' transitional allowance. Despite what the EP says, there are no legal impediments.
	Conflicts of interest	MEP side activities (outside jobs): the declarations of financial interests will be improved, providing exact amounts of income and a central online repository.	No progress.	Given the inherent risk of real or perceived conflict of interest involving MEPs engaging in side activities, there should be a ban on side activities (with limited exceptions for professions in such sectors as education and healthcare).
	Lobbying	Strengthen the EU transparency register secretariat by adding resources for stronger checks on interest representatives.	No progress.	More financial and human resources are needed to effectively monitor the 12k registered organisations.
	Lobbying	Mandatory registration for all lobbyists involved in EP activities.	No progress.	The Transparency Register should be mandatory across all three EU institutions for all interest representatives and third country diplomatic representatives.
	Lobbying	MEPs, parliamentary assistants and EP officials must declare scheduled meetings with all interest representatives, diplomatic representatives of third countries and third parties covered by the scope of the Transparency Register.	No progress.	This commitment, as outlined in President's 14-point plan, is key to preventing undue influence.
	Friendship groups	A ban on so-called MEP friendship groups with third countries.	No progress.	A ban on friendship groups should urgently be adopted. These often involve countries with questionable human rights reputations such as Qatar.

	Whistleblower rules	There should be a revision of staff regulations and internal rules, to align with EU whistleblower directive standards.	No progress.	Whistleblower protections help prevent and detect abuses of power. Parliament should revise its internal rules now to protect parliamentary assistants who report wrongdoing, in line with EU whistleblower legislation.
	Code of Conduct	Strengthen the advisory committee on the application of the Code of Conduct.	No progress.	Independent oversight of the implementation of the EU Code of Conduct is critical. Self-policing doesn't work.
	Code of Conduct	A system of warnings and reminders will be introduced before sanctions are to be applied.	No progress.	The current sanctions system is under sole control of the President of the Parliament. Sanctions should be applied by an internal oversight body with independent outside input and be strengthened to serve as a deterrent.
	Ethics Training	There will be mandatory ethics training for staff, voluntary ethics training for MEPs.	Some progress made on staff ethics training.	Training should be mandatory for MEPs as well as staff.