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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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18.01.2023

Turning Influence Into Money in the EU Parliament



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The spectacular unmasking of alleged bribery in the EU Parliament has attracted limited attention in Britain, despite police in Brussels discovering suitcases stuffed with hundreds of thousands of euros in cash and a vice president of the Parliament landing in jail.

Qatar and Morocco are accused of buying up Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in a scandal that revolves around a vote on a resolution criticising Qatar during the World Cup. The Greek MEP Eva Kaili is now suspended as vice president of the Parliament with many pointing derisively to a speech she made last year, saying “the World Cup in Qatar is proof actually of how sports diplomacy can achieve a historical transformation of a country with reforms that inspired the Arab world”.

She added that Qatar was a frontrunner in labour rights and that some members of the European Parliament were bullying and discriminating against the country.

Reforms are promised in the wake of the scandal but tighter regulations have been successfully resisted in the past. Damagingly, the latest scandal is assumed to be only the tip of a giant iceberg of corruption in the Parliament which has long been targeted by Transparency International, the anti-corruption watchdog, which has identified some of the Parliament's more blatant boondoggles.

British disinterest in the scandal is not so surprising since a curious feature of the Brexit "debate" that raged before and after 2016 was that the actual workings of the EU never attracted much interest. Leavers ludicrously scapegoated all the EU institutions as bureaucratic monsters trampling on British freedoms and thwarting its global ambitions. Remainers portrayed the EU as a sort of warm and cuddly Paddington Bear-like institution, operating much like a UN agency.

The denouement was inevitable since MEPs made little secret of their willingness to turn their influence into money, something which they could generally do without breaking the law. One German MEP who wrote to companies in 2018 to advertise his services was not even reprimanded. Another declared earnings of €40,000 a month for business consultancy and other activities, though later he modified this figure down to a measly €5,000-€10,000 monthly.

Rules forbidding MEPs from selling their influence to the highest bidder are lax and are, in any case, little enforced. "Time and time again," explains the online magazine *Politico*, "members of the [EU] Parliament have resisted proposals to shine more light on their work and shrugged off the lack of enforcement of rules already in place – all the while taking advantage of perks and privileges that would make a member of the Borghese family blush."

It is not as though MEPs are poorly remunerated to begin with, each of them earning about €9,400 a month as well as €4,800 general expenses for which they need not produce receipts. In addition, they are allowed to hold as many other jobs as they want with the nature of their activities often declared in the most general and untransparent way.

The known rewards of MEPs through what Transparency International politely calls "moonlighting" are excessive, but these are only known about because of voluntary declarations. An analysis by Transparency International suggests, the true extent of MEPs being bought up is far greater: "The findings demonstrate once again the prevalence of 'moonlighting' among elected members in Brussels," reads the TI analysis. "The actual

figures may be even higher, given that MEPs self-declare their earnings and their declarations are not subject to institutional checks.”

Beneath the Radar

Is the age coming to an end when companies claiming to be delivering greater “efficiency” simply sack their experienced work forces and outsource their services to whoever makes the cheapest bid? The “more efficient” enterprises cruise along for years until a crisis or disaster capsizes them. [Something like this happened to Southwest Airlines in the US during the storms.](#)

Cockburn’s Picks

Criminals make more money out of adulterating food with cheap inputs than they do out of heroin, according to Professor Christopher Elliott, School of Biological Sciences, Queen’s University Belfast. Food imports into the UK, much of it through the port of Rotterdam, have barely been tested for adulteration since Brexit. He points out that more than 40 per cent of fresh fruit and vegetables eaten in the UK are produced in South America and Central Asia in places where drugs cartels are at their strongest. See [this fascinating interview](#) with Elliott and [this on food fraud](#).

Patrick Cockburn is the author of [War in the Age of Trump](#) (Verso).

CounterPunch 17.01.2023