



**SOVEREIGNTY
PROTECTION OFFICE**

THE EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS HAS CONFIRMED THE FINDINGS OF THE REPORTS OF THE SOVEREIGNTY PROTECTION OFFICE

14 May 2025





The European Court of Auditors has stated that EU funding for NGOs is not transparent and that the role of these organisations in shaping policy-making is unclear. According to a recent report by the guardian of the EU finances, it is impossible to know exactly how much money is flowing from European taxpayers' pockets into the coffers of NGOs. What can be established is that in the last decade, a significant portion of the funding has gone to a few privileged organisations. These organisations have free access to European institutions and the opportunity to influence policy-making through members of the European Parliament. They have been commissioned to do so by foreign countries and the European Commission. They apply the weakest sanctions to representatives who have fallen under their influence and are guilty of corruption. It is impossible to verify which of the NGOs engaged in lobbying activities truly represent European values and interests and which are agents of a foreign country. The European Commission nevertheless wants to replace the Member States' independent defence systems against foreign interference with an EU system based on such a useless register.

The European Parliament's authority at an all-time low

Members of the European Parliament were last embroiled in a corruption scandal involving foreign influence in 2022, but according to an international investigative report, nearly one in four MEPs has been involved in a scandal that has received public attention¹. The EP consistently applies the weakest sanctions in corruption cases, its measures to promote transparency lack seriousness, and its proposals to improve accountability lack impact². In this regard, even Transparency International, which works closely with European institutions, has said that there is an urgent need to *"take a look at how decisions, when it comes to transparency, integrity, ethics and anti-corruption, are taken in this house"*, because *"there has been a 'culture of impunity' among MEPs in the Parliament, which was a factor in the Qatargate crisis that shook the organisation (...) The right and power to impose sanctions on an MEP fall directly within the purview of the EP President. For a number of reasons, including political considerations as I suspect, they have not been put forward."*³

¹ During the 2019–2024 European Parliament term, 163 of the 704 active MEPs were involved in some kind of scandal that received public attention. Twenty-three MEPs were convicted in court in connection with these scandals. See: Bart de Konig, et al.: Almost 1 in 4 EU lawmakers involved in scandals or breaking the law, from harassment to corruption. *Follow the Money*, 31 January 2024, Source: ftm.eu/articles/european-parliamentarians-involved-in-hundreds-of-scandals.

² Dr. Bernadett Petri: Rendszerváltás vagy módszerváltás – mit tanultak az EU intézmények az EP korrupciós botrányából? [System change or method change – what have EU institutions learned from the EP corruption scandal?] *Szakpolitikai Figyelő*, 30 January 2023. National University of Public Service, European Strategy Research Institute. Source: eustrat.uni-nke.hu/hirek/2023/01/29/rendszer-valtas-vagy-modszervaltas-mit-tanultak-az-eu-intezmenyek-az-ep-korrupcios-botranyabol.

³ Nick Aiossa, Deputy Director of Transparency International, at the hearing of the European Parliament's Special Committee on Foreign Interference (ING2) on 26 January 2023. Source: multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/sede-afet-ing2-committee-meeting_20230126-1400-COMMITTEE-ING2-AFET-SEDE.



In connection with Qatar-gate, European voters were confronted with the fact that non-governmental organisations registered in Europe had made covert attempts to promote the interests of other countries in Brussels. These organisations had access to EU institutions, where, under the guise of activities beneficial to society, they engaged in political lobbying and influence-peddling that ran counter to the interests of the European people. NGOs covered up the activities of a criminal organisation that bought political influence for countries such as Qatar, Morocco, and Mauritania by bribing members of the European Parliament. The politicians who were bought, including the Vice-President of the European Parliament, represented foreign interests in the EP in exchange for bribes and helped third countries obtain favourable business opportunities in the European Union. Several of them were re-elected in the 2024 European Parliament elections.⁴

The consequences of Qatargate

“One could have written the script: everybody’s horrified, everybody is now going to do their best to stamp it out and put things in place to make sure that things like this can’t happen when the truth is that there are problems in the ethical system of the EU administration,” said European Ombudsman Emily O’Reilly after the scandal broke.⁵

When she was first elected President of the European Commission in 2019, Ursula von der Leyen promised to pay special attention to transparency. After the Qatargate scandal broke, the European Commission reassured the public that it was protected from such cases because commissioners are subject to stricter rules than members of parliament. They had already disclosed which NGO lobby groups listed in the EU transparency register they had met with, on what issues, and how many times. MEPs vowed to do everything in their power to prevent similar cases from happening again. The President of the Parliament presented a 14-point package of proposals to enhance transparency and accountability – some elements of which she herself admitted had been dormant for decades – and MEPs initiated a review of EU funding for NGOs engaged in lobbying activities⁶. Meanwhile, the NGOs claimed that they were victims of a witch hunt, that the government wanted to use them as a scapegoat for the scandal caused by the lack of regulation and non-compliance with existing rules.

⁴ Elisa Braun – Max Griera: 2 MEPs suspended from Socialist group over Qatargate probe. *Politico.eu*, 4 March 2025, Source: politico.eu/article/european-parliament-corruption-qatargate-belgian-prosecutor-immunity-meps.

⁵ Suzanne Lynch: EU standards chief calls for tougher lobbying rules amid Qatar scandal. *Politico.eu*, 12 December 2022, Source: politico.eu/article/eu-ombudsman-emily-oreilly-calls-for-ethics-rules-revamp-qatar-lobbying-scandal-erupts-eva-kaili-european-parliament.

⁶ Sarah Wheaton: Mission: Impossible – Transparency? EU closes a chapter on Qatargate. *Politico.eu*, 23 September 2023. Source: politico.eu/article/eu-meps-qatargate-transparency-assets-declaration.



One year after Qatargate, the European Commission proposed the establishment of an EU defence system against foreign influence attempts, which would be contrary to the founding treaties and would remove national powers from Member States⁷. The Commission's proposal is based on the EU Transparency Register, which has since proven to be riddled with flaws and contradictions and unsuitable for filtering out foreign agents lobbying European institutions⁸. Nevertheless, with its proposals in the Defence of Democracy package, the European Commission would force Member States to replace their own defence systems with a system based on this register.

However, EU funding for NGOs remains non-transparent, according to the latest findings of the European Court of Auditors. The institution believes that the problem is even more serious than previously thought. According to the guardian of the EU finances, NGOs received at least €7.4 billion in EU funding between 2021 and 2023, of which €4.8 billion came from European Commission funding programmes and €2.6 billion from EU funds managed by Member States. However, the auditors warn that these figures should be treated with caution, as there is no reliable data on exactly how much support NGOs have received.

The European Commission may distribute more than €1.5 billion under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme launched in 2022, making it easier than ever for NGOs to access EU funding⁹. According to the European Court of Auditors, CERV also contributes to the lack of transparency in the EU's funding system. The EC provides inaccurate information on the amount of grants and only informs the public about the primary beneficiaries, even though the programme allows for the redistribution of grants. In such cases, it is not clear who ultimately benefited from EU funding and what it was used for.

More than 12,000 NGOs received funding from EU programmes audited by the European Court of Auditors, but a significant portion of the money has been going to a few privileged organisations for at least a decade. The information recorded and published by the European Commission about these NGOs is unreliable, and it cannot even be verified whether these organisations respect EU values and interests in their lobbying activities funded by EU taxpayers. Nor can the role they play in shaping political decisions be assessed.

The European Court of Auditors has essentially stated that the transparency register presented by the European Commission as a silver bullet against foreign influence attempts is unusable in its current form, as it is based on self-declaration and often contains false information.

⁷ "Defence of Democracy – Commission proposes to shed light on covert foreign influence". Press Release, Strasbourg, 12 December 2023, Source: ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_6453.

⁸ Salsabil Fayed, et al.: The US is major funder of lobbying activities of Europe's civil society organisations. *Follow the Money*, 18 May 2023, Source: ftm.eu/articles/ngos-in-brussel-who-pays-them.

⁹ The audit examined EU programmes such as the European Social Fund Plus, Horizon Europe, AMIF, and LIFE.



Although the NGOs that engage in the most intensive lobbying activities receive significant support from the US government, American private foundations – including George Soros’s organisations – and European state foundations, neither the European Parliament nor the European Commission verifies whether they are acting on behalf of foreign states or foreign economic interests.¹⁰

“In order to hold public decision-makers accountable for their actions, citizens need to know to whom and for what purpose funds are granted, as well as how they are used and whether the recipients of the funds respect the values of the EU,” the European Court of Auditors stated. The institution also found specific cases of misuse.

The European Commission has attempted to exert covert influence on MEPs. Exceeding its powers and using European taxpayers’ money, the EC has commissioned NGOs to interfere in parliamentary decision-making. After the European Court of Auditors launched an investigation into the financing of NGOs, the EC tried to cover up the fact that its €5.4 billion environmental funding scheme, LIFE, had contracted NGOs to launch mass protests and mass email campaigns, putting pressure on MEPs in the negotiations on the European Green Deal and influencing EU legislation in line with their own goals, often against the interests of European citizens.¹¹ The scandal even implicated Frans Timmermans, the architect of the European Green Deal. The former Vice-President of the European Commission and 2019 Spitzenkandidat of the Socialists involved in the Qatargate scandal denies any involvement. It was also Timmermans who, in the final stages of the 2019 campaign for the presidency of the European Commission, gave the EC a new political instrument in its fight against Member States: rule of law reports written with the help of EU-funded NGOs.¹²

„I have to admit that it was inappropriate for some services in the Commission to enter into agreements that oblige NGOs to lobby members of the European Parliament specifically,” the Commissioner for Budget made a statement that amounted to an admission.¹³

¹⁰ Salsabil Fayed, et al.: The US is major funder of lobbying activities of Europe’s civil society organisations. *Follow the Money*, 18 May 2023, Source: ftm.eu/articles/ngos-in-brussel-who-pays-them.

¹¹ Robert Hodgson: Use of EU funds to lobby MEPs was ‘inappropriate’, commissioner says. *Euronews.com*, 23 January 2025. Source: euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/23/use-of-eu-funds-to-lobby-meps-was-inappropriate-commissioner-says.

¹² Ákos Bence Gát: Érdemi eszmecsere vagy „süketek párbeszéde”? – Az Európai Bizottság jogállamisági országlátogatása. [Substantive exchange of views or “dialogue between the deaf”? – The European Commission’s rule of law country visits.] *Szakpolitikai Figyelő*, 10 February 2023. National University of Public Service, European Strategy Research Institute. Source: eustrat.uni-nke.hu/hirek/2023/02/09/erdemi-eszmecsere-vagy-suketek-parbeszede-az-europai-bizottsag-jogallamisagi-orszaglatogatasa.

¹³ Piotr Serafin, European Commissioner for Budget, during a debate in the European Parliament on 22 January 2025, on the transparency of EU funding for organisations lobbying European institutions. Source: multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/Plenary-session_20250122-0900-PLenary.