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The European Parliament and the Qatargate

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Introduction

In December 2022, the European Parliament (EP) was confronted with the biggest corruption scandal in its history. The Belgian police carried out a series of searches, during which they seized more than €1.5 million in cash and arrested several members of the EP (MEPs), former MEPs and members of their entourage.¹ It soon became apparent that all these actors, sheltered in part by bogus non-governmental organizations (NGOs), had sold their influence to third countries – for example, Qatar and Morocco (Fernández-Molina and Khakee, 2024). The EP, which usually has little audience in the media, was suddenly exposed at length on the front page. This unprecedented crisis has confirmed the concerns of some MEPs, scholars and think tankers, who have long been calling for tighter control over the behaviour of MEPs, the presence of interest groups in the EP and the influence of foreign countries (Alemanno, 2017; Chalmers, 2019; Costa, 2019).

The Qatargate scandal has been an opportunity to put three issues back on the European Union (EU) agenda. The first is that the EP is lagging behind in the regulation of the behaviour of its members and of the interest groups active in its premises, which must be constantly adapted to the increasing powers and influence of the institution. The second is the difficulty encountered by the EU institutions in agreeing on instruments and procedures to improve transparency and probity, even though the issue has been on the agenda of the von der Leyen Commission since its investiture. The third is the growing pressure exerted by certain third countries on the Union's institutions, which carries the risk not only of disrupting the way they operate and influencing their decisions but also of undermining their legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Brussels is the second place in the world – after Washington, D.C. – for both lobbying and diplomatic activities (Coen and Richardson, 2009). The recent annual report from the German-based NGO LobbyControl (2024) establishes that corporate lobbyists alone have spent some €1.3bn in 2023 to influence EU-based decision-making. According to the report, 80% of the lobbyists that met with Commission president Ursula von der Leyen came from the business sector. The challenges in terms of influence, transparency and probity are immense. This is particularly true when it comes to lobbying by third countries, which is currently poorly regulated and which involves players that are not very sensitive to the sanctions that lobbying firms or large companies could face if they were to break the rules. There is a tension here between the operation of democratic bodies,

¹ *EU corruption scandal: MEP denies Qatar bribery after €1.5M seized* (13 December 2022), *BBC News*, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63952993> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

which demand transparency and probity, and diplomatic practices, which require confidentiality. Regulation becomes very complex when third-party states act in the grey area that exists between lobbying and diplomacy and play both sides (Sánchez et al., 2017).

It is wrong to think that nothing has been done on the issue: since the early 1990s, MEPs have regularly taken it up. As the EU develops new competences and the EP becomes more involved in decision-making (Costa and Brack, 2013), the degree of pressure mechanically increases. It is also significant that Qatargate concerns non-EU countries, which are growingly affected by EU decisions taken – whether in terms of the country's public image, regional conflicts or specific policies such as the movement of people, promotion of human rights, energy or trade agreements.

In this article, we will first recall how the EP has historically addressed the question of interest representation and MEPs conduct. Second, we will see how this debate was reactivated after the 2019 European elections and how the Qatargate has fuelled reforms. We will detail the initiatives taken by the EP and the way a new EU body in charge of ethics has been recently created. Finally, we will see that the case is far from closed and that, although presented as ambitious, those reforms have not been considered up to the challenges by many experts and actors.

I. The EP and Interest Representation

The rise in power of the EP since the early 1990s has been accompanied by growing concern about the regulation of the representation of interests within it and the behaviour of its members (Lehmann, 2009). What was of little significance in a purely consultative body became crucial in an institution participating in the decision-making process (Schmidt, 2013). For the EP, this was first a matter of principle: ensuring that its deliberations were not disrupted by outside interference. But it was also an issue of credibility vis-à-vis citizens, national leaders and other institutions. The EP has therefore gradually regulated lobbying within its walls and imposed rules of conduct on MEPs (Costa, 2009; Greenwood, 2017).

The Galle report was the first attempt by the EP to regulate the activities of lobbies (16 March 1992), but it was not followed up. After several years of stormy debate, the EP adopted the Ford and Nordmann reports (16 July 1996), which made it compulsory for all MEPs to disclose details of their professional and remunerated activities, the financial support they had received in terms of staff or equipment and the identity of donors (Costa, 2009). In 1996, an annex to the Rules of Procedure also defined the procedures for obtaining permanent passes for visitors (in particular lobbyists) and the obligations to which parliamentary assistants were subject. The objective was to prevent lobbies from paying them in addition to their salaries or even from making them available free of charge to the less conscientious MEPs. This initial regulatory framework was fleshed out throughout the 2000s, and each scandal was followed by a tightening of the rules. On 1 April 2008, the EP adopted the Stubb report creating a register to ensure transparency on the funding and sponsors of interest representatives, and a code of conduct for them. The Commission has accepted the principle of a common register, based on a voluntary basis. These tools have been modified several times, to become more binding and to collect more detailed data. Since 2021, the register has been common to the EP, the Commission and the Council.

In 2016, the EP launched a new reform of its rules of procedure. The Corbett report (22 November 2016) suggests prohibiting MEPs from carrying out lobbying activities in parallel with their mandate, imposes more detailed declarations of financial interests and provides that they should only meet registered lobbyists, and make these meetings public. The report proposes that the EP should be informed if MEPs obtain a job as a lobbyist after their term of office. They must also justify the use of their general expenses allowance and undertake in writing to respect the code of conduct. The activities of MEPs have also gradually come under the scrutiny of the various bodies responsible for promoting ethics in the European institutions: OLAF (the European Anti-Fraud Office), the European Ombudsman, the Court of Auditors, the European Court of Justice and, since 2021, the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO).

The discussions around the regulation of MEPs' behaviour and lobbying regulation were never easy (Costa, 2009; Crespy and Parks, 2019). Examined over time, the progress is real, but it is not commensurate with the development of the pressure exerted by lobbies of all kinds on the actors of EU institutions. This is because the EP's efforts to promote ethics have come up against four recurring difficulties – beyond anyone's structural reluctance to impose unpleasant rules on themselves. First, there are strong contrasts between national conceptions of representation, legitimacy and probity (Kergueno, 2024). Second, similar divisions exist between the political groups that make up the EP: left-wing groups have always been very vocal against the representation of private interests in the EP, whilst members on the right part of the hemicycle tend to consider that it is a normal activity in a pluralist society (Marshall, 2015). Third, the efforts of the EP have been hindered by the disagreements between the various EU institutions. Finally, MEPs have constantly struggled to reconcile two contradictory imperatives: the need to be in tune with society's expectations and the need to make decisions independently and to protect themselves from the influence of interest groups.

II. Re-Launching the Debate After the 2019 Elections

After the 2019 European elections, the EP has restarted the reflections on issues of transparency, probity and independence of MEPs on two fronts: the creation of a body in charge of ethics and the question of foreign interference. Before her election by the EP, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen pledged to set up a new organ in charge of ethics. In order to weigh on the process, the EP commissioned two detailed studies.

The first one (Demmke et al., 2020) analyses the effectiveness of relevant rules, policies and practices within member states regarding conflict of interest for top political appointments and gives some policy recommendations. The second study (Frischhut, 2020) provides an overview of transparency and integrity-related elements in the current EU setting and proposes the creation of an 'Independent Ethics Body'. On 16 September 2021, the EP called for the setting-up of such a body.² Rapporteur Daniel Freund (Greens/European Free Alliance, Germany) considered that the existing system of self-regulation had failed and that a new initiative was needed to win back the citizens'

²European Parliament, *News: European parliament Parliament calls for EU Independent Ethics Body*, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210910IPR11931/parliament-calls-for-eu-independent-ethics-body> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

trust. In its resolution (Kalniete, 2023), the EP called for the creation of an organ that would be able to (1) start investigations on possible conflicts of interest or ‘revolving door’ cases involving Commissioners, MEPs and staff of the EU institutions, based on information from third parties (journalists, NGOs, whistle-blowers and European Ombudsman); (2) propose and advise on ethics rules before, during and in some cases after a term of office or employment; (3) assist the EP committee on legal affairs in its assessment of possible conflicts of interest of Commissioners-designate; (4) support the EP’s right of inquiry; (5) work with similar EU bodies and agencies at national and EU level; and (6) general recommendations. The body would be composed of nine members: three each for the Commission and EP and three from amongst former judges of the CJEU, former members of the Court of Auditors and former EU Ombudsmen.

The second initiative taken right after the elections was the creation of a Special Committee on Foreign Interference, with the task of combating meddling by third countries in the democratic processes of EU member states. It was set up in June 2020, mainly because of tensions in the EU’s relations with Russia and China. The final report was adopted in plenary on 9 March 2022 by an overwhelming majority. It maps the threat of foreign interference: disinformation, manipulation of social media platforms and advertising systems, cyber-attacks, threats against and the harassment of journalists, covert political funding and elite capture and co-optation. It recommends a specific sanctions regime against foreign interference and disinformation campaigns.

These two initiatives failed to produce concrete reforms. Like often in EU policy-making, a crisis was needed to move things forward. Indeed, the analysis of public policy has long shown that it is a crucial factor in far-reaching reforms, especially at EU level, where path-dependency is strong and veto players numerous. Whatever the theoretical model – Sabatier’s ‘advocacy coalition framework’ (1999), Hall’s ‘paradigm shift’ (1993), Kingdon’s ‘multiple streams framework’ (1995) and so forth – a crisis opens up a wide-ranging debate and puts the issue on the institutional agenda, gives more resources to the advocates of reform, temporarily weakens the veto-players and, finally, alters the balance in society or the institutions to make reform possible. The Qatargate played that role.

III. The Qatargate Crisis as a Catalyst for Change

The complex story of the Qatargate goes back to July 2022, when the Belgian police started an investigation into an alleged criminal organization. On 9 December 2022, the police executed 20 raids across Brussels; the homes and offices of the suspects were searched, including offices within the EP.³ On 10 December 2022, Belgian police found large bags of cash (600.000 Euros) at Eva Kaili’s home, one of the EP vice-presidents.⁴ They also intercepted her father with a large suitcase full of money. Seven persons were arrested (Brenton, 2022): MEP Eva Kaili; her father; Francesco Giorgi, a parliamentary

³ *EU corruption scandal: MEP denies Qatar bribery after €1.5M seized* (2022a), *BBC News*, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63952993> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

⁴ *Senior MEP Eva Kaili in custody over ‘bags of cash from Qatar’* (12 December 2022), *Euronews*, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2022/12/12/eu-parliament-vice-president-eva-kaili-in-custody-for-alleged-bags-of-cash-from-qatar#:~:text=Greek%20socialist%20MEP%20Eva%20Kaili,to%20be%20a%20fiery%20session> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

assistant who is Kaili's partner; MEP Andrea Cozzolino; Luca Visentini, Secretary-General of the International Trade Union Confederation; Antonio Panzeri, a former Italian MEP and the President of NGO 'Fight Impunity'; Niccolò Figà-Talamanca, Secretary-General of the NGO 'No Peace Without Justice'. Later, Panzeri's wife and daughter were arrested in Italy and the Belgian MEP Marc Tarabella in Belgium. In this context, media recalled that Ms. Kaili, a Greek Socialist in charge of relations with the Middle East, has been quite active to explain that Qatar – soon to be organizing the football World Cup – was 'a frontrunner in labour rights' (21 November 2022) and had made substantial democratic progress.⁵ Another protagonist, Belgian socialist Marc Tarabella, considered that Qatar was 'an example to follow for other countries in the region' (Walker, 2022).

The hearings in front of the Belgian justice started as soon as the 14 December 2022. Giorgi immediately confessed to having been bribed by Qatari and Moroccan officials to influence the EP decisions (Gotev, 2022). Belgian Justice Minister explained that the investigation was indeed including the EU-Morocco trade agreements and the fisheries agreement. Connections with Mauritania were also found – via Panzeri and Giorgi – as well as Saudi Arabia. Viola von Cramon-Taubadel, a Green MEP, claimed that Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Russia were also purchasing influence in the EP over an extended period (Becker et al., 2023). In January 2023, Panzeri pleaded guilty as part of a deal with the Belgian authorities and revealed the identities of those he bribed as well as those he conspired with.

The course of the case before the Belgian courts was marred by numerous difficulties – such as the dismissal on 20 June 2023 of the judge in charge. The investigation seems to have been carried out in a rather haphazard manner, so that a possible trial will not take place before 2025, and there is a significant risk that some of the protagonists will be acquitted (Moller-Nielsen, 2023). The important thing, as far as we are concerned, is in the consequences of this scandal for the regulation of the behaviour of EU players and third parties within its institutions.

Three narratives emerged in the EP and in the media to assess the situation created by Qatargate.

The first, which was sensationalist, suggested that it was a massive corruption scandal involving numerous MEPs who had put the EP in the pay of outside powers. Media like French speaking Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* (Colart and Matriche, 2024; Puissant and Hofmann, 2024) and *Politico Europe*⁶ (the European edition of the German-owned news organization 'Politico') have devoted dozens of papers to denounce a large-scale scandal. Far-right MEPs have also developed a fairly predictable anti-parliamentary and anti-Islam discourse on the issue.⁷

A second, more moderate, approach sees the Qatargate as a serious case of corruption, albeit a limited one (Quatremer, 2023a, 2023b). It highlights the inadequacy of the rules

⁵ *Verbatim report of proceedings - situation of human rights in the context of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar (debate) - Monday, 21 November 2022*, europarl.europa.eu, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-11-21-INT-1-137-0000_EN.html (Accessed 04 July 2024).

⁶ *Qatargate files* (2024), *POLITICO*, available at <https://www.politico.eu/european-parliament-qatargate-corruption-scandal-updates/> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

⁷ See, for instance, the unpublished book written by French far-right MEP Patricia Chagnon: *Qatargate* (2023), available online at <https://qatar-gate.fr/>.

governing the behaviour of MEPs and lobbies, the EP's refusal to tackle this issue head on and the murky game played by certain NGOs and former MEPs, who enjoyed excessive privileges in the EP's premises. The proponents of this vision of things also highlighted the extent of the strategies of influence of certain third countries – denounced by the reports of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference (9 March 2022 and 1 June 2023). Overall, they reiterated the need for the EP to offer solid guarantees of independence, transparency and probity with a view to the June 2024 elections.

A third view of the affair tended to play down the facts and to reject any radical questioning of the organization of parliamentary work. The proponents of this approach felt that no measure could prevent an elected representative or staff member from allowing himself or herself to be corrupted, and that sacrificing the freedom of action of MEPs would serve no purpose. This line of argument, heard particularly within the ranks of the European People's Party (EPP), refers to a specific conception of the parliamentary mandate, which should leave MPs complete autonomy in their expression, activities and votes (Carolan, 2024).

IV. The Reaction of the EP and the Creation of a New EU Body in Charge of Ethics

On 15 December 2022, less than 1 week after the first events, the EP adopted a resolution denouncing attempts at foreign interference. MEPs also requested a list of reforms: setting up a committee of inquiry to investigate attempts by non-EU countries to influence the EP; making the transparency register mandatory; foreseeing – like in the Commission – a 'cooling off' period for senior EU officials and former members (European Parliament, 2022). On 8 February 2023, the EP President Roberta Metsola proposed a reform plan⁸ containing most elements present in the resolution, as well as additional measures, like the ban of friendship groups with third countries where official organs exist, and a new declaration on financial interests. The mandate of the special committee on foreign interference (INGE 2) was expanded on 14 February 2023 (European Parliament, 2023a).

The EP adopted two resolutions on 16 February 2023. In the first one (European Parliament, 2023b), MEPs approved the first reforms proposed by the president and group leaders and listed areas where further improvements were needed: a better implementation of the Code of Conduct; an approval process for trips paid by third countries; a reform of the Advisory Committee on the Conduct of Members; the creation of asset declarations by MEPs at the beginning and end of their mandate; more resources for the Transparency Register; an obligation for MEPs, parliamentary assistants and EP agents to declare work meetings with third country diplomats; an adaptation of internal rules with the Whistleblower Directive; an extension of the measures taken regarding representatives of Qatar to those of Morocco. The resolution also addressed the specific issue of the financing of NGOs. The second resolution was requesting, once again, the creation of an independent ethics body before summer 2023 (European Parliament, 2023c).

The EP political groups also took various initiatives. The socialist group (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, S&D) called for 'zero tolerance' for corruption and

⁸Group leaders endorse first steps of parliamentary reform: News: European parliament (8 February 2023), available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230208IPR72802/group-leaders-endorse-first-steps-of-parliamentary-reform> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

issued a 15-point plan.⁹ The Greens and the Left shared those views.¹⁰ The EPP group underlined the risks linked to the presence, in the EP premises, of NGOs and proposed the creation of a register for foreign representatives.¹¹ Renew Europe called for the creation of an independent ethics body. The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) also requested more ambitious reforms.¹² NGOs involved in the topic of ethics, and transparency shared the idea that ambitious reforms were needed (van Hulten, 2023) but expressed deep concerns about the capacity of NGOs to continue their work of scrutiny within the EP if overly restrictive rules were adopted regarding their funding and access to EP premises (Corporate Europe Observatory 15 February, 2023). On 1 June 2023, the Special Committee on Foreign Interference claimed the need for a stronger culture of security, with high levels of transparency, integrity and accountability. It underlined ‘numerous loopholes in Parliament’s integrity and transparency rules’ and called for President Metsola’s 14-point proposal to be adopted as soon as possible. At the end of the year, in December 2023, the European Commission presented a proposal for a directive establishing harmonized requirements in the internal market on transparency of interest representation carried out on behalf of third countries (European Commission, 2023). At the time writing, this text is pending in the EP, in first reading of ordinary legislative procedure.

On 25 April 2024, during the very last plenary session of the EP before the elections, MEPs have approved an agreement creating the ‘Interinstitutional body for ethical standards’ (IBES) between 8 EU institutions: Parliament, Council, Commission, Court of Justice, European Central Bank, European Court of Auditors, European Economic and Social Committee and European Committee of the Regions.¹³ It will develop, update and interpret common minimum standards for ethical conduct and publish reports on how they have been reflected in each signatory’s internal rules. The institutions participating will be represented by one senior member, and the position of Chair of the IBES will rotate every year between them. Five independent experts will support its work and be available for consultation.

The Commission’s proposal was described as ‘unsatisfactory’ by MEPs in July 2023,¹⁴ but their representatives in the interinstitutional negotiations obtained some modifications. The EP was thus able to approve the proposal, but it reiterated its commitment to

⁹S&D Group, *15-point plan to prevent and combat corruption and corruptive political interference* (19 January 2023), available at <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/publications/15-point-plan-prevent-and-combat-corruption-and-corruptive-political-interference> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

¹⁰Green/EFA Group, *Green/EFA group congratulate new Vice-President but demand zero tolerance strategy to stamp out corruption* (18 January 2023), available at <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/article/press/greens-efa-group-congratulate-new-vice-president-but-demand-zero-tolerance-strategy-to-stamp-out-corruption> (Accessed 04 July 2024); The Left, *How Parliament, & the EU, should react to the Qatar corruption scandal* (12 December 2022), available at <https://left.eu/issues/explainers/how-parliament-the-eu-should-react-to-the-qatar-corruption-scandal/> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

¹¹EPP Group, *How to save NGOs from the Qatargate black sheep* (1 March 2023), available at <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/opinions/how-to-save-ngos-from-the-qatargate-black-sheep> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

¹²ECR Group, *Qatargate: Double standards can’t be tolerated* (15 December 2022), available at https://ecrgroup.eu/article/qatargate_double_standards_cant_be_tolerated (Accessed 04 July 2024).

¹³European Parliament, *Press Release: Parliament signs up for new EU Body for Ethical Standards* (25 April 2024), available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240419IPR20581/parliament-signs-up-for-new-eu-body-for-ethical-standards> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

¹⁴European Parliament, *Press Release: EU ethics body: Commission’s proposal “unsatisfactory”, MEPs say* (12 July 2023), available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230707IPR02430/eu-ethics-body-commission-s-proposal-unsatisfactory-meps-say> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

developing the independent ethics body in the future, mainly to allow it to carry out investigations on its own initiative and to issue recommendations for sanctions. The EP also considered that the body should be composed of independent experts as full members and should be able to monitor the behaviour of members and staff of EU institutions before, during and after their term of office or service. The new EU ethics body was formally created on 15 May 2024.¹⁵

V. Reforms That Do Not Solve Everything

The creation of the IBES a few days before the 2024 European elections prevented populists and Eurosceptics from accusing the EU institutions of having learned nothing from Qatargate. However, years of complex debates and outright opposition have harmed its initial ambitions, leaving the body without any investigative powers. Also, it will not cover the European Council or the activities and officials of the member state holding the EU's 6-month rotating presidency. The discussion in the EP was quite controversial, and the text was adopted with only 301 in favour, 216 against and 26 abstentions. The EPP opposed it, considering that the new body 'threatens European parliamentarism' and had no legal basis. In 2019, the EPP already voted down a measure requiring MEPs to disclose to the public their meetings with lobbyists. NGOs involved in the issue (mainly Transparency International Europe, LobbyControl and Corporate Europe Observatory) described the body as a bare minimum, as the concerns they expressed during the whole process were not considered.¹⁶ They were, for instance, always critical of the system of self-policing, in which Commissioners, officials and MEPs judge one another in their respective systems, through a puzzle of different bodies with weak competences and lack of impact; however, the IBES does not address this problem as it just brings the institutions together to work on common minimum standards. It is also not an answer to the lack of effective enforcement of the existent rules and does not take inspiration from the more ambitious existing authorities of this kind, such as the French High Authority for the transparency of public life (Haute Autorité pour la Transparence de la Vie Publique). Finally, the NGOs were concerned with the lack of financial resources of the body that are very far to allow for an efficient functioning.

The creation of the IBES was also criticized by EU lawyers Alberto Alemanno (2023) and Maria Cristina Carta (2023). Emilio De Capitani (2023), a former head of unit of the EP and a campaigner for transparency in the EU, also decried its lack of ambition. A team of scholars, who authored a 'White book on the way to fight conflicts of interest and corruption within the EU' (Lelieur et al., 2023), decried the EU institutions' naive belief in the capacity of transparency obligations to transform practices – that inspired the IBES design. They propose four key measures to advance further: establishing a permanent and independent 'Observatory for the Integrity of Democracy' within the EU to document relevant issues; implementing a new framework of incompatibilities for European public officials to address conflicts of interest and revolving doors; enhancing sanctions, which are presently underused, against both individuals and companies that violate regulations;

¹⁵Nielsen, N. (2024b), *New EU ethics body adopted - but will have no investigative powers*, *EUobserver*, available at <https://euobserver.com/eu-political/ar2ec4ec31> (Accessed 04 July 2024).

¹⁶Joint Civil Society Letter on EU Ethics Body Negotiations, 30 January 2024. <https://transparency.eu/joint-civil-society-letter-on-eu-ethics-body-negotiations/> (Accessed: 04 July 2024).

and expanding the jurisdiction of OLAF and EPPO to encompass criminal offenses impacting the EU's democratic interests.

The nature of the IBES, which is only based on an inter-institutional agreement, was also challenged, as it may suffer from a lack of independence towards the institutions it is supposed to control. The Franco-German report on the future of the EU (Costa and Schwarzer, 2023, p. 26) suggested, for instance, the creation of a similar organ by a regulation adopted via article 15 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (good governance and the participation of civil society), 298 TFEU (good administration) or 352 TFEU (subsidiary powers); to allow the new organ to bring a case to the CJEU, the report claimed that it would be even better to include entirely new provisions in the treaty and make it a fully-fledged EU institution.

Conclusion

Many media, think tanks and NGOs have analysed the Qatargate from the angle of the 'virtue' of elected representatives. This is not necessarily the best approach (Buge, 2021), because the notion is problematic and collides with the principle of the representative mandate: who can say what elected representatives should do with their mandate, given the prohibition on imperative mandates and the separation of powers? They must abide by the law, but as EPP members pointed out, MEPs must remain free to speak and vote as they please. The fact, for example, that Mrs. Kaili took a position in favour of Qatar should not, in itself, be considered problematic – if there is no proof of corruption. This is not to say that far-reaching reforms are not needed at EU level, but that they must take account of different objectives and be equal to the cunning of the most unscrupulous interest groups and the most dishonest MEPs. The work of reform is indeed far from over, considering the limitations of the recent changes, that avoid some key issues, like the external incomes of MEPs, the revolving doors or the funding of European political parties, topics that are by no means new to the discussion (Costa, 2019).

The fight against corruption and conflict of interest thus remains fundamental for the EP and the EU in at least four respects. First, it is a question of the EU's independence from foreign powers that do it no favours. Second, it is a matter of credibility for the EU vis-à-vis states that do not respect democratic standards – within the Union or on a global scale. It is also a particularly important issue for the EP, if it wants to be heard in the institutional debate: MEPs can only claim electoral legitimacy if they prove themselves worthy of it. Finally, EU institutions, and the EP in particular (Hegewald and Schraff, 2024), need to be exemplary in order to rebuilt citizens' trust.

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