

## MEPs pledge to 'stand-up for citizens' and democracy against excessive lobbying

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News

Candidates across the political spectrum are called upon to increase transparency in the EU, writes Pam Bartlett Quintanilla.



It is widely known that Brussels is Europe's lobbying capital and that globally, it is second only to Washington in terms of the number of lobbyists dedicated to influencing legislation and policy on behalf of their clients or interest groups.

Estimates of the number of lobbyists in Brussels range from 15 to 30,000, while the EU's voluntary transparency register which only covers the parliament and commission, lists only about 6000 interest groups.

The lack of basic information about the number of interest groups in Brussels and the nature of their role in the EU's decision-making process makes it difficult to hold these actors to account and leads to increased accusations that the European institutions are not working in favour of the public interest.

Mass protests blaming the EU for austerity policies are a prime example of this.

In fact, just this month the Guardian newspaper and other media outlets across the EU reported on the problematic role of industry lobbying on EU law-making on roaming fees, energy policy, tobacco regulation, data privacy rules and consumer protection. And an opinion poll commissioned in 2013 by leading transparency NGOs revealed that 73 per cent of citizens polled were "concerned that lobbyists representing the business sector have too much influence in EU policy-making", with the figures rising up to 81 per cent in Austria and 83 per cent in Spain.

It is perhaps no coincidence then, that these two countries are also respectively in second and third place in terms of the numbers of MEP candidates that have signed up to the 'politics for people' pledge. Germany is currently in first place with over 230 candidate supporters, while Austria has 157 and Spain 121. The figures change hourly as candidates sign up, so it is worth visiting the website from time to time to check the numbers.

The pledge, which has candidates all across Europe promising to "stand-up for citizens and democracy against the excessive lobbying influence of banks and big business" if elected, has secured support from over 1200 MEP candidates from parties across the political spectrum and from all 28 EU member states.

The campaign is run by the alliance for lobbying transparency and ethics regulation (ALTER-EU), together with a broad coalition of civil society organisations from across Europe, including active partners across 19 EU member states. Behind the pledge slogan lie a range of concrete proposals aimed at securing improvements in key areas such as lobby transparency, ethics regulation, and balanced participation in EU decision-making.

"MEPs have been called upon to promote the introduction of a mandatory EU lobby register which requires all EU lobbyists to sign-up and to provide clear information about their resources"

Once elected, MEPs have been called upon to promote the introduction of a mandatory EU lobby register which requires all EU lobbyists to sign-up and to provide clear information about their resources, aims and staff. Transparency campaigners are also advising MEPs to provide information about lobbying contacts proactively, including by publishing an online list of all meetings held with lobbyists, as some current MEPs already do.

Other proposals seek to ensure a balanced participation of different sectors of society, notably in the European commission's "expert groups", which advise the commission on future policy and legislation. MEPs in the past term were alerted by ALTER EU and its member groups to the fact that many commission expert groups were dominated by private interests, leading MEPs to freeze the budget until the commission promised reform.

Recently, the European ombudsman also launched an own-initiative inquiry into the composition of expert groups to address the issue. MEPs in the next parliamentary term should therefore lend their support to continue these positive efforts.

In the field of ethics, the politics for people campaigners are calling for tough revisions to the code of conduct for members of the European parliament, highlighting specifically the conflicts of interest that may be created by MEPs' second jobs, or through the revolving door phenomenon - when the line between the regulated and regulators becomes blurred. Campaigners also demand more detailed declarations of interest from MEPs and a ban on external funding of staff and offices.

Finally, the politics for people campaigners are calling on MEPs to guarantee citizens' right to know how decisions are taken in Brussels including by ensuring that EU documents and information are pro-actively published and that citizens are involved in all stages of the decision-making process and not only during the pre-defined periods of public consultation.

ALTER EU hopes that around 200 of the candidates that endorsed the pledge will eventually be elected and that they will work hand-in-hand with civil society to address the growing concern about the role of industry lobbying in EU decision-making and to improve transparency and ethics in the European Union.

### **About the author**

Pam Bartlett Quintanilla is a member of the ALTER-EU steering committee and campaigner at access info Europe



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