

Transparency and better regulation in the EU

Written by The Parliament Magazine on 5 February 2019 in Event Coverage
Event Coverage

Europe's citizens should expect the EU decision-making process to be as transparent and open as possible, with access to legislators such as MEPs and European Commissioners a fundamental part of the democratic process.



Photo Credit: Jean-Yves Limet

These were two of the key messages to emerge from a recent high-level policy event on lobbying.

The meeting, in the European Parliament on 6 December, was hosted by UK Conservative MEP Sajjad Karim, organised by The Parliament Magazine and the Society of European Affairs Professionals (SEAP) and supported by Japan Tobacco International (JTI).

The two-hour discussion, entitled “Transparency and better regulation in the EU”, highlighted to the business sector the importance of an effective and robust transparency system.

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Karim explained why he believes that business input is important for lawmakers and the law-making process. The ECR group member also challenged the idea that business lobbying is “regressive or harmful” to the process.

A member of parliament's legal affairs committee, Karim has championed reform in the area of better regulation and pointed out that British MEPs from his party already publish an overview of their meetings with lobbyists as well as their expenses.

As a member of the Advisory Committee on the Conduct of Members, Karim told the audience that he had direct experience of overseeing how transparent MEPs are in their parliamentary and non-parliamentary dealings.

“Ultimately, a key part of our role as legislators is to meet stakeholders and citizens affected by legislation in order to understand its potential impact. We have the freedom to decide whether or not concerns expressed should be taken on board or not, but we should always ensure businesses are given a fair hearing to avoid unintended consequences, for example.”

“It is hard to imagine lawmakers being able to make informed decisions without listening to all sides of a debate, for and against. You cannot cherry-pick democracy” **Ben Townsend, Vice President of EU affairs at JTI**

He added that he knew of instances when it had been clear that if businesses had been “better consulted” and at an earlier state of the legislative process, “there would not have been so many amendments tabled by MEPs, nor so many opposition. I would therefore support stakeholders being consulted at the earliest stage in the process.”

This was a message partly echoed by another guest speaker, Wes Himes, President of SEAP, who informed participants that his organisation fully supports all efforts to build trust and maximise transparency.

He said SEAP's aim is to “be bold and set the pace” on the issue of transparency and highlighted the growth of what he called “grassroots democracy”, examples of which include the EU's citizens' initiative.

“Things like this are welcome developments so hopefully we will see more of it,” he said.

Another speaker, Stefano Marmo, a senior policy adviser at AmCham EU, said that his organisation believes transparency is an “indispensable element” of the policy-making process.

However, he added, “There are clear areas where transparency in the EU decision-making process can be further improved”, including increased transparency on trilogue negotiations, “particularly post-Lisbon where they have now become the norm.”

Marmo said, “We would also like to ensure that there is a systematic and timely communication of preparatory documents such as agendas and draft delegated acts.”

“Ultimately, a key part of our role as legislators is to meet stakeholders and citizens affected by legislation in order to understand its potential impact” **Sajjad Karim MEP**

Ben Townsend, Vice President of EU affairs at JTI, said that there was still often a “climate of distrust” when the issue of lobbying involving the EU institutions and corporations and/or NGOs is raised.

He made a robust defence of the right of lobbyists to engage with decision-makers saying, “lobbying is an integral part of democracy and is essential in providing insights in the various societal interests as well as in providing information and expertise. It is hard to imagine lawmakers being able to make informed decisions without listening to all sides of a debate, for and against. You cannot cherry-pick democracy.”

Further contribution came from Antoine Colombani, a member of cabinet for European Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans, the EU official in charge of better regulation and the rule of law.

Colombani spoke of the “huge” impact lobbying can have on policy-making, adding that increased transparency in this area had been a key plank of Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker’s term in office.

He also agreed that lobbying “is necessary for democracy”, partly because citizens need to know what influence is being brought to bear on the EU decision-making process.

He said the commission was fully committed to a mandatory transparency register for lobbyists, adding, “We say ‘no registration, no meetings’.

“The commission has tried to convince the parliament and council of the need for a mandatory register but so far we are a bit disappointed with the results. What is needed is full transparency on who is trying to influence what in each of the EU institutions.”

Closing the event, Karim said he also thinks that the institutions should more readily share documents, adding, “Those with an interest in the file should be able to access these documents and we should make this easier by making them accessible online.”

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