

Statement by Civil Society on EP Resolution on transparency and accountability in the European institutions

Civil Society Europe, as the coordination for civil society organisations (CSOs) in Europe, firmly condemns the recent allegations of corruption concerning Qatar and Morocco involving members of the European Parliament and staff and calls on shedding full light to this case through ongoing and future investigations and follow up judicial proceedings.

As CSOs, we are often asked to comply with high standards of transparency and accountability for our financial and advocacy-related activities; and this is perfectly in line with democratic societies. But it is appalling to see that the same standards do not seem to apply to European institutions. As such, we reiterate our full commitment to comply with the highest levels of transparency and zero corruption policies.

Civil society organisations have for decades been on the forefront of denouncing the lack of action by EU institutions to address corruption and lack of transparency issues, revolving doors practices, and the lack of sound ethical standards and procedures for appointment of staff, controls of expenses, gifts, publicising meeting with lobbyists including foreign countries representatives, as well as difficulties with access to documents. We urge a strong response from the EU institutions to set the rules of sound openness and accountability by a thorough assessment and revision of their anti-corruption policies, as also requested by many MEPs.

Therefore, we welcome the calls of the resolution which include: reform of the Parliament's lobbying rules - including representatives of third countries in the EU lobby register, an independent EU ethics body, disclosure of assets by MEPs, cool down periods for MEPs, and disclosure of their assets at the beginning and end of their mandate as a first positive step, on which also all other EU institutions should engage.

However, we are extremely worried about select voices among Members and Political Groups of the European Parliament that attempted to shift the balance of responsibility in this case from the EU institutions and its members to civil society and impose disproportionate provisions to CSOs that could undermine their role as checks and balances to the rule of law.

In many EU countries, and beyond, Civil Society Organisations that act as watchdogs are victims of reprisal and smear campaigns by authorities. This also coincides with the creation of Gongos, complicit of Governments or companies.

The European Commission has recently published a report on the implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights Dedicated to Civic space, and in particular restrictions to freedom of association,

assembly, and expression that CSOs are increasingly facing. A proposal to tackle Strategic Lawsuits Against Participation, filed by corporations and States pleading defamation against activists that shed light on corrupt practices, violations of human, social and environmental rights is currently being discussed by EU institutions.

While it is critical that civil society organisations are accountable to their members and society, it is important that the legislative framework applying to CSOs does not impinge on their ability to act. CSOs are subject to transparency and accountability rules in the countries in which they operate, which includes proportionately the publication of their budget (incomes and disbursements), governing bodies and directors, and anti-money laundering measures. In this case, the existence of these rules has assisted Belgian authorities to uncover the fraud. However, there is ample evidence, produced also by the EU institutions¹ how such rules, and in particular money laundering and counter terrorism financing rules, have been misused by corrupt or illiberal regimes to silence CSOs and activists, especially watchdogs and human rights defenders.

In our watchdog role, we will continue to work so as to ensure that the European Parliament fully plays its role “to represent people’s interests with regard to EU law-making and to make sure other EU institutions are working democratically”² and to strive towards the common good.

1 See for instance: **Fundamental Rights Reports on Civic Space**: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/cooperation/civil-society/civil-society-space>, **EC Rule of Law Reports 2020-2022**: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/rule-law-mechanism_en, **2022 Annual Report on the implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights**: https://commission.europa.eu/aid-development-cooperation-fundamental-rights/your-rights-eu/eu-charter-fundamental-rights/application-charter/annual-reports-application-charter_en

2 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en>