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EU lobbyists scramble over their exact numbers

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As the Commission's upcoming voluntary lobbyists register occupies the mind of every lobbyist in Brussels, some have started to question exactly how many of them there are, casting doubt over the 15,000 figure originally put forward by the Commission.

Background:

Launching the European Transparency Initiative in a speech at Nottingham Business School in 2005, Administration and Anti-Fraud Commissioner Siim Kallas stated: "At the moment there are about 15,000 lobbyists established in Brussels, while around 2,600 interest groups have a permanent office in the capital of Europe."

The figure was subsequently taken up by the European Parliament in a landmark [report](#) on lobbying adopted on 8 May 2008 ([EurActiv 09/05/08](#)), the introductory statement of which declared: "It is estimated that there are about 15,000 lobbyists and 2,500 lobbying organisations in Brussels."

The Brussels figure is significantly smaller than estimates for Washington, D.C., with the Washington Post citing the number of registered lobbyists operating in the US capital at 34,750 in 2005.

Among those to question the figure is Tom Antonissen of Logos Public Affairs, a Brussels consultancy. "I estimate that the European Public Affairs Consultancies Association (EPACA), with its 35 members, represents some 500-700 lobbyists, so together with the Society of European Affairs Professionals (SEAP), with 300 individual members, we are talking about a maximum of 1,000 lobbyists," said Antonissen.

Adding another 500 who are not members of EPACA or SEAP would still account for just 10% of the 15,000 figure, Antonissen explained, wondering "where the other 13,500 lobbyists come from".

According to Antonissen, the remainder could come from "trade associations, NGOs and think tanks," most of which should be covered by the Commission's upcoming register, set to be made public on 23 June 2008.

Antonissen also suggests that there may be "national governments and regional, local and cities' representatives". He also cites "churches and religious organisations". But "all of these are exempt from the Commission's register" so they should not be included in the statistics, he argues.

Meanwhile, the European Parliament states on its website that there are 4,570 accredited lobbyists in possession of an access badge to the institution.

Tom Spencer of the European Centre for Public Affairs argues that "because the Commission is saying it is up to you whether to register, we won't be any clearer on the figure of how many, nor where from". The EU executive "should not have been drawn in to quasi-legislation without tight definitions" of what is required, he adds.

Spencer also believes that the issue needs to be widened to include lobbyists based outside of Brussels who nevertheless seek to influence EU policymaking. "We talk about 15,000 lobbyists in Brussels, but why?," he asks, stating that focusing the debate on Brussels "fails to define what we are really talking about here".

This view was echoed by Paul de Clerck of Friends of the Earth Europe, a member of the steering committee of the Alliance for Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Regulation (ALTER-EU), who said one reason for the difference between Parliament's 4,570 figure and the 15,000 "is that only organisations based in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg can get a Parliament pass and are thus in the register".

"That means that a lot of lobbyists from outside Brussels, who are actually lobbying in Brussels, are not in the Parliament register. That can be thousands of lobbyists," he pointed out.

Asked to clarify the matter, Commission spokesperson Valérie Rampi said the EU executive does not endorse the '15,000' figure, describing it as an external estimate. "Without a register we do not have a more precise estimate of the number of institutional actors," she said.

While Vice President Kallas has occasionally used the 15,000 figure, he has always specified that it is an estimate, Rampi explained, adding that it could be replaced by the real figure if the names of individuals are included in a future common register between the Commission and the Parliament.

The focus of the lobbying debate now shifts to the work of the inter-institutional working group to be established by the Parliament report, which is set to present a proposal for a common register between the Commission, Parliament and Council by the end of the year.

Positions:

German Socialist MEP and **chair of Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee Jo Leinen** said last week that he does not know where the 15,000 figure comes from. As for Parliament, it has granted some 5,000 access badges to lobbyists, he said.

Tom Spencer of the **European Centre for Public Affairs** said the 15,000 question "goes to the heart of the debate," adding that he first heard the figure mentioned in the 1990s and "it is inconceivable that the EU can have doubled in size [since then] and yet we still go on with this figure".

"The Commission should have commissioned some independent research on this before formulating policy," Spencer argues.

Establishing a mandatory register for individual lobbyists would "solve the 15,000 question at a glance," argues **Paul de Clerck** of **Friends of the Earth Europe**, who is a member of the steering committee of the Alliance for Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Regulation (**ALTER-EU**).

"The European Parliament's register only includes part of the total number of lobbyists as each organisation or company can only receive four permanent access passes to the Parliament. Those four are the ones that are in the Parliament register," said de Clerck.

Explaining how it works at the Friends of the Earth office, de Clerck said "we have more than 10 people involved in lobbying activities regarding the Parliament, so that means more than six of them are not listed in Parliament's register".

Next steps:

- **23 June 2008:** Commission to launch its own voluntary lobbyists register.
- **By end 2008:** Inter-institutional working group to present proposal for a common lobbyists register.

Links

European Union

- European Commission: [Transparency Initiative](#) [FR] [DE]
- European Commission: [Coming soon: the Commission's Register for interest representatives](#) [FR] [DE]
- European Commission: [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\) on the Commission's lobbyists register](#)
- European Commission: [Code of Conduct for lobbyists](#) [FR] [DE]

EU official documents

- European Parliament: [Stubb/Friedrich report on lobbying](#) (2 April 2008) [FR] [DE]