

PRESS RELEASE

ALTER-EU rings alarm bell over European Commission backtracking on lobbying transparency



Brussels, 13 February 2008 – Today, the Alliance for Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Regulation (ALTER-EU) has sent a letter to Commission President Barroso, expressing grave concerns over the development of an EU lobbying transparency register which is to be launched by the Commission this spring. In the letter, ALTER-EU warns that it will reconsider support for the European Transparency Initiative if the Commission would indeed backtrack from key promises it has made in the context of the European Transparency Initiative.

In recent meetings with Commission staff, ALTER-EU has learned that in the current drafts for the lobbying transparency register, two crucial pieces of information are missing: 1) names of individual lobbyists and 2) meaningful information on how much money is spent on lobbying.

Without names of lobbyists and meaningful financial information, the register would be practically useless to investigate ‘conflicts of interest’ and ‘revolving doors’ cases or to identify the main actors in strategic alliances and behind front groups. It would also fail to provide meaningful information on who is spending how much to influence EU decision-making

“A register that will not answer simple questions like ‘who are the lobbyists’ or ‘how much money is spent on lobbying by whom?’, would only provide a semblance of transparency and not allow public scrutiny of lobbying”, comments Erik Wesselius from Corporate Europe Observatory.

According to Paul de Clerck of Friends of the Earth Europe, “A lobby register without the names of the lobbyists is useless. It would make the 3-year European Transparency Initiative a joke. We are very concerned that despite many public announcements the European Commission will fail to deliver on transparency”.

In the letter, ALTER-EU therefore asks Commission President Barroso to ensure that the register will include basic information, including the names of lobbyists and the finances involved.

Existing lobbying transparency registers in the US and the Canada do contain names of individual lobbyists and they allow for searches on lobbyists’ names. The register of the European Parliament also lists names of individual lobbyists. “Journalists need transparency and access to accurate information, which is not guaranteed with the current proposal”, said European Federation of Journalists Director Marc Gruber. “We don’t see why the Brussels journalists community should have less access to information on lobbyists than journalists in the US or in Canada.”

The Commission services currently propose to ask lobby firms to specify their lobbying income in:

- absolute numbers with a range of € 50,000 or more or;
- as a relative percentage of their income with ranges of 10% of their income.

This proposal will fail to provide useful information, as explained in two examples:

- With an annual lobbying income of around € 2,000,000 in 2007 for a medium sized lobby firm, a range of 10% would imply that each category would represent € 200,000. Consequently, lobby contracts for an amount of € 5,000 would be in the same category as contracts for € 190,000, rendering the information useless.

- To identify the main actors in strategic alliances or behind front groups, more precise financial information is needed. For example: a company spends € 50,000 on a lobby campaign and enlists two other companies who symbolically support that campaign with € 1,000 each. The system would not distinguish between the large and the small donors within this strategic alliance, and the register would thus fail to provide transparency.

The US lobbying disclosure register shows that it is possible for lobby firms, with little administrative effort, to report their lobbying income related to each of their clients every 6 months, rounded off to the nearest US\$ 10,000 (which compares to bands of € 7,500).

Notes

1) The Alliance for Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Regulation (ALTER-EU) is a broad coalition of over 160 public interest groups, trade unions, academics and public affairs firms, advocating, among others, effective measures that will allow public scrutiny of EU decision-making. More info: www.alter-eu.org

2) In the [Communication from the Commission: Follow-up to the Green Paper 'European Transparency Initiative'](#) COM (2007) 127, a lobbying transparency register, which will be coupled to a code of conduct for lobbyists, is announced for "Spring 2008". The launch is not to be expected before May.

3) The Constitutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliament is currently debating a draft report on the development of the framework for the activities of interest representatives (lobbyists) in the European institutions (2007/2115(INI)), drafted by MEP Alexander Stubb. The report will be voted in plenary in May.

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