

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Office of First Vice-President Frans Timmermans
Head of Cabinet

Brussels, 17. 11. 2015
Ares (2015) 3649950

Dear members of the ALTER-EU Steering Committee,

First Vice-President Timmermans has asked me to thank you for your email of 4 September 2015 and for ALTER-EU's research about meetings between interest representatives and the European Commission. I am replying also on behalf of President Jean-Claude Juncker.

We have looked carefully at the findings of your research and would like to comment in particular on the three issues you highlight in your email.

1. "Corporate lobbyists dominating the high-level lobbying scene"

Being open to outside input is fundamental to the sound development of the Commission's policies and a principle that is enshrined in Article 11 TEU. This ensures that stakeholders can present their views on decisions that may affect them. Engaging with stakeholders enhances the quality of decision-making by providing channels for the input of expertise. The Commission's overriding principles regarding contacts with interest groups are transparency, integrity and equality of access, in order to protect the general interest of the Union.

The Commission does not share the conclusion derived from your analysis that most bilateral meetings, especially in certain areas, are held with "lobbyists representing business and trade associations". This gives a rather partial view of our intensive interaction with stakeholders of all kinds. There are more businesses and business associations (SMEs, trade associations, multinational corporations, etc.) than civil society organisations and they are highly active in seeking bilateral meetings with Commissioners and Directors-General. The Commission seeks to obtain input from a representative cross-section of society – the quality of our proposals depends on it – but it is not always possible to achieve parity in terms of the numbers of bilateral meetings. In our experience, NGOs often use other channels for interacting with the Commission such as public consultations, position papers and letters. Commissioners and Directors General are also in constant touch with the NGO community during public events such as conferences, workshops and roundtables, country visits, and plenary meetings with members of national and European associations.

*Ms Nicola FREEMAN
Coordinator
Alter-EU*

E-mail: coordinator@alter-eu.org

These exchanges are not included in the lists which you have analysed as they are not within the scope of the reporting obligations derived from Commission Decisions C(2014) 9048 and C(2014) 9051. The balance in stakeholder representation that the Commission seeks is therefore achieved not only through bilateral meetings but also in its broader, longer-term dimension, as explained above.

The Commission is constantly striving to improve the way intensity and breadth of our interaction with all stakeholders. You will have seen in the Better Regulation Agenda¹ that the Commission plans to strengthen public consultation at every stage of the policy cycle, thereby providing multiple avenues for civil society and other actors to express their views and to provide ideas on Commission proposals and policies under development.

2. Rule on meeting only registered lobbyists

As of 1 December 2014, Commissioners, their Cabinet members and Directors General publish information on meetings held with lobbyists. Moreover they meet only with stakeholders who have registered in the Transparency Register. This was a major and unprecedented step forward. This rule applies to those most closely involved in Commission decision-making, i.e. Commissioners and their Cabinets, and Directors-General.

This renders registration a practical pre-requisite for interactions with the Commission. Since the entry into force of the Decisions on 1 December 2014, an unprecedented number of organisations have registered (over 2,500), including several major banks and companies (Goldman Sachs, HSBC, Royal Bank of Scotland, Coca Cola, Heineken, etc.) clearly demonstrating the positive impact of this measure.

The Commission has long recommended to all its staff to check the credentials of a given interest representative to make sure they are registered in the Transparency Register and, if they are not, to encourage them to register. The Commission constantly promotes this good practice as part of our training and awareness-raising activities on relations with interest groups.

3. Publication of information on meetings with interest representatives

The Commission's commitment to applying promptly and correctly the new policy of publishing information on relevant meetings held with interest representatives is evidenced by the data published, which so far covers more than 6,000 such bilateral meetings.

The online agendas of the Commissioners to which you refer are not an appropriate point of comparison, as they represent a calendar of upcoming meetings and events, many of which are not covered by the publication requirements as they concern encounters with entities and individuals falling outside the scope of the decision (Heads of State or Government, Ministers, international intergovernmental organisations, public authorities, etc.) or participation in public events that cannot be qualified as "bilateral meetings" such as conferences, workshops, round-table debates, diplomatic visits, official ceremonies, etc.

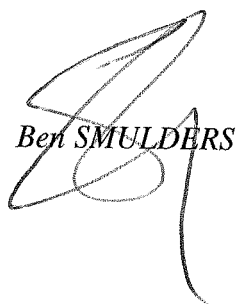
./.

¹ COM(2015)215 final.

This Commission has said it will "lead by example" when it comes to transparency matters. The Commission looks forward to continuing to work with ALTER-EU and with all concerned stakeholders in finding practical and effective ways to further strengthen the existing transparency and integrity framework governing the relations between the EU institutions and interest representatives. In particular, the forthcoming proposal for a mandatory Inter-Institutional transparency register will help to ensure that the other institutions apply the same high transparency standards as the Commission. The Commission intends to launch a public consultation on this in the coming weeks and would strongly encourage you to contribute, ahead of the formal tabling of the proposal next year.

Thank you for your continuing interest in this vital topic.

Yours faithfully,


Ben SMULDERS