

EU: EU-funded lobbying is expensive and undemocratic

By Bill Wirtz

EU Observer (21.09.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2yhtC1o> – While the European Union, with its surrounding institutions, steadily accumulates more political power, the call for transparency has rightfully increased as well.

The EU heavily watches all forms of corporate lobbying, yet has created its very own branch of lobbyists which turn out to be untransparent and biased.

In March of this year, the European Parliament's budgetary control committee, under the responsibility of German EPP rapporteur Markus Pieper, investigated the whole scale of EU-funded lobbyism, and the immense grants associated with it.

In the year 2015 alone, the EU spent a total €1.2 billion in grants in order to support European NGOs, which lobby the EU institutions.

More interesting than the total expenditure is the unequal distribution of these grants.

Unequal distribution

For instance, in the 2015 budget, almost 60 percent of the funding available under the EU's environmental, social, health and human rights programmes was allocated to just 20 NGOs.

Pieper's report specifically outlines that EU funding favours larger NGOs more than smaller ones. It seems out of place for the EU to favour an oligarchical system of NGO influence.

The intention behind the EU's funding of social or environmental NGOs appears to be coherent and understandable

at first sight: as corporate funding is supposedly destroying health, the planet and social services, the union needs to invest in non-governmental actors to even out the differences.

As a result, the corporate lobbyists are outnumbered by hundreds of EU-funded environmentalist protesters with whistles and large banners.

Why exactly the EU supports volunteers to repeat the things that are already in the hearts and minds of the people in the institutions seems complicated to grasp.

As certain EU member states struggle to renovate public infrastructure, it seems difficult to explain to the electorate that Brussels needs to spend more than a billion euros, so that NGOs can march in the streets to tell politicians something they already believe.

It is also misguided for the EU to believe that it can make its democratic deficit disappear by sponsoring activists out of civil society. While this process might make the EU more participatory – it is participation for the few, not the many.

This is especially concerning in regard to the political biases of these NGOs.

Political warfare

The organisation NGO Monitor has denounced some EU-funding to go to groups engaging in “political warfare” against Israel, and called the focus of the funding “disproportionate.

The Pieper report therefore called for the rejection of funding for NGOs who “demonstrably disseminate untruths and/or whose objectives are contrary to the fundamental values of the European Union, democracy, human rights and/or strategic commercial and security policy objectives of the European Union institutions”.

In a 2016 paper, the European Centre for International

Political Economy (ECIPE) exposed the EU commission's funding of Anti-TTIP advocates.

Several anti-free trade organisations claim to have been made viable due to EC funding, yet the ECIPE has described finding information of allocation of funding to be "almost impossible" and concludes therefore that: "There is no transparency about EU grants to NGOs and financing practices".

While the EU pushes for free trade deals with other continents, it also spends money on grants for organisations whose sole purpose is to prevent these trade deals.

Nina Katzemich from the German NGO Lobbycontrol slammed the Markus Pieper's report as "anti-pluralistic" and added: "To give money to [NGOs] to balance this imbalance ... represents a partial approach for the solution of this European democratic deficit."

Given the unfair distribution and the clearly outlined political bias of these organisation, it can hardly be pluralistic to invests hundreds of millions of euros into this system.

Transparency contradictions

Many European NGOs are quick to demand transparency from each and every public actor, yet they fail themselves to display any sort of transparency.

The EU parliament's budgetary control committee itself pointed out that the mechanism that distributes these grants makes it impossible to comprehensively trace EU funds to the organisations that received them.

This literally means that the EU funds NGOs who demand transparency, but simultaneously do not communicate this detailed information to the public, and neither do the receivers.

Pieper also points out that there are data inconsistencies between EU commission systems – as well as between commission DGs – when it comes to the rules of funding attribution. The left hand honestly does not know what the right one is doing.

It stands to reason, in the interest of taxpayers in the EU's member states, that EU-allocated funds ought to be transparent and serve their necessary purpose.

If the EU merely funds NGOs to sell the perception that its democratic process is inclusionary, then it manifestly fails to meet the requirements of European democratic ideals.

NGOs are a legitimate way for voters to be engaged citizens in the discourse between politicians and civil society. They should, however, not compete for the best ideas and not the best way to get grants.

EU-funded lobbyism is undemocratic, expensive, and has no place in the current European system.

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