

Why Brussels' toxic lobbying culture must end

Wednesday 27 February 2019, by [GUE/NGL](#), [SCHIRDEWAN Martin](#) (Date first published: 7 February 2019).

Did you know German carmakers Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Porsche and BMW have all provided free vehicles to the EU's rotating presidencies since 2012 - just as the regulations on vehicle emissions were being negotiated? (Photo: EUobserver)

When it comes to accountability and transparency at the EU, it will not come as a surprise to many that some Brussels institutions do not fare too well in terms of voters' trust and confidence.

After all, the influence that lobbyists have on EU officials is notorious - from the nightly corporate cocktail receptions in Brussels to the revolving door of former commissioners lobbying their successors on behalf of multinationals.

However, what is often ignored is that these same people are supposed to be our representatives in Brussels.

A report out this week sheds new light on this problem and details the influence lobbyists have on member state representatives and embassies inside the EU, who in turn hold huge sway in shaping EU legislation.

The study, *Captured States: How EU Governments are a Channel for Corporate Interests'* by Corporate Europe Observatory lays out how many EU member state embassies and their permanent representatives are essentially corporate mouthpieces, channelling multinationals' influence.

Did you know, for example, that German carmakers Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Porsche and BMW have all provided free vehicles to the EU's rotating presidencies since 2012, just as the regulations on vehicle emissions were being negotiated?

They call it sponsorship.

What is revelatory about this study is the sheer number of embassies, committees and advisory groups that lobbyists can target: from the Council all the way down to standing committee on plants, animals, food and feed.

This is in addition to the commission and various MEPs and officials at the parliament. No wonder Germany refused to divulge which lobbyists their people have been meeting to the authors of this study - something to hide?

Take the Council of Europe and mobile phone roaming charges negotiations in the EU.

Telefonica and roaming charges

It is well known that Telefonica has historically enjoyed close ties with the Spanish government.

What we discover is that the council's proposals were actually far more industry-friendly than anything the commission or parliament had put forward.

Big operators like Telefonica, Deutsche Telekom and France's Orange were pulling the strings behind member states' negotiators.

Yes, the operators ultimately failed in putting the boot into new roaming rules but they were somewhat saved by the Spanish officials who successfully weakened the final EU agreement.

Similarly, this study also details how German carmakers were working overtime on lobbying esoteric bodies like expert and advisory groups such as the technical committee on motor vehicles.

The result?

Europe's new real-world emissions test standards were undermined and delayed, thus prolonging toxic emissions and contributing to more deaths annually.

Dieselgate and Glyphosate

And the orders for the delay came directly from Angela Merkel in a phone call to Jean-Claude Juncker via an email from the Bavarian minister president's office acting on behalf of BMW and the German Association of the Automotive Industry.

So even Europe's most powerful leader has done the bidding of lobbyists.

The fact that many of these crucial EU committees are often complex and opaque means there is little transparency or accountability.

Everything from the renewal of glyphosate - involving Monsanto now owned by German chemicals giant, Bayer, and in cahoots with the Bundesinstitut für Risikobewertung (Federal Institute for Risk Assessment) - to austerity and fiscal governance policies, the cosy ties between member state governments, former EU officials and corporations are so entrenched and historic that they threaten the democratic process.

These are serious, endemic and systematic problems.

Elite corporate lobbies enjoy unrivalled access to member state leaders - something that civic groups and NGOs can only dream of.

It's outrageous to also learn from the study that member states even actively seek out corporate lobbies to champion a particular cause or on behalf of a national industry - as the recent Austrian presidency did with the steel producer Voestalpine, that would ultimately promote the use of fossil fuels.

The study puts forward a number of recommendations to put a stop to this toxic culture.

The fact that the public are now more aware of what lobbyists get up to is positive.

However, the lack of citizens' input into national decision-making on EU matters must be reversed.

We urgently need more transparency through lobby registers across all EU institutions, and all member states must publish their positions during negotiations.

We must bolster the European Ombudsman who does a great job in defending transparency.

Above all, there needs to be a wholesale cultural change from member state parliaments to the EU institutions. 500 million citizens deserve better - we cannot go on like this.

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