
COMMISSION DEFENDS ITSELF OVER TRAVEL EXPENSES ROW

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The European Commission spent nearly [REDACTED] on travel during January and February 2016, including Commission President Jean-Claude Junckers two-day trip to Rome, which cost €27,000.

The Commission spent an average of [REDACTED] for each of the 28 Commissioners per month, according to data obtained by Spanish transparency NGO Access Info.

The blocs foreign chief, Federica Mogherini, hit the record. Her mission to Baku (Azerbaijan) and Yerevan (Armenia) between 29 February and 3 March 2016 totalled €75,393.

The costs of the trips vary considerably from Commissioner to Commissioner. The EU executive justified the expenses during a news conference on Wednesday (9 August). Some trips required commissioners to fly with commercial airplanes, spokeswoman Mina Andreeva said. That was the case for Mogherinis mission as well as Junckers trip to Rome.

Andreeva said that in both cases, there were no commercial flights available.

The information on the amount of the expenses is incomplete, Andreeva said. Costs for Junckers trip to Rome covered a delegation that was composed of nine people. The Commission rented a private jet because there were no commercial flights that could fit the agenda of the president.

The Commissions code of conduct allows Commissioners to travel with chartered airplanes if no commercial flights fit the schedule, she added.

During Junckers Rome visit on 26 February 2016, he had a very intense programme, including meetings with Italian President Sergio Mattarella, Senate and House Presidents Sergio Grasso and Laura Boldrini, then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and former President Giorgio Napolitano.

Another big expense came from Commissioner Christos Stylianides, who is charge of humanitarian aid. He visited a number of countries, including Somalia and Turkey, racking up a total of €11,000.

Juncker expensed [REDACTED] during January and February 2016 [REDACTED] including a [REDACTED] half day allowance for a visit to Germany.

However, if divided by trip, expenditure was not excessive. The total [REDACTED] was split between 261 official missions, which make up an average of roughly [REDACTED] per trip. The most expensive overnight stay, in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, cost €629.

Transparency light

Access Info criticised the Commission for disclosing only a small part of its expenses. Six months ago, 120 European citizens requested access to all of the 28 EU Commissioners travel expenses from 2016. But the Commission took a unilateral decision to disclose data just for January and February 2016, and will not release any more.

Giving 120 requesters only two months worth of expenses data is a token gesture, said Helen Darbishire, Executive Director of Access Info Europe.

The Commission has told us that it has had lengthy discussions about how to handle these requests over the course of the past six months. That time could have been better spent responding to the requests.

29 journalists take European Parliament to court

Twenty-nine journalists have filed 27 complaints with the European Court of Justice against the European Parliament, which allegedly refused to give information on how MEPs spend their allowances

Andreeva argued that the Commission is one of the most transparent administrations in the world.

The Commission also said that Juncker has not travelled a lot since the beginning of his term in 2014.

On average, the president of the Commission carried out two missions per month, plus one third in Strasbourg for the session of the European Parliament and other travels for events such as the G20 and the G7, Andreeva said.

Two missions a month means that we do the minimum, she added.

As for the missions that Commissioners make in their home countries, President Juncker has asked [the Commissioners] to travel in their member states because they are our best ambassadors to explain to citizens how the EU works, Andreeva said.

Kaynak/Source: