
REVEALED: EXXONMOBIL'S PRIVATE DINNER WITH CYPRUS' TOP EU BRASS

- 14.08.2018

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EU Observer, August 14, 2018

Oil and gas firm ExxonMobil recently hosted Cypriot MEPs, Cyprus' highest EU diplomat and EU commissioner Christos Stylianides at a dinner in a private club in Brussels, to inform them about its offshore drilling plans near Cyprus.

However, no record was made of what was said at the out-of-hours private event, causing concern for campaigners on the question of the EU's transparency and accountability on meetings with lobbyists.

EU commissioner Christos Stylianides at a different, unrelated dinner in 2015. Although Cypriot, the commissioner has no responsibility for Cyprus, or oil or energy. (Photo: European Commission)

The dinner, held in April, was confirmed by all parties - but only after EUobserver asked the European Commission for information about the meeting in an access to documents request.

The commission's register of meetings had merely stated that Stylianides "a Cypriot" had a meeting with ExxonMobil about "update of exploration activities offshore Cyprus".

The commission told this website that Stylianides "was invited to and attended" the dinner with ExxonMobil's vice-president.

"The meeting was of an informative nature, on a topic with relevant geopolitical parameters for the eastern Mediterranean's wider region," it said in a letter.

Neither the commission letter nor ExxonMobil's previously undisclosed invitation letter explained why the invitee was Stylianides, who is only responsible for the commission's humanitarian aid and migration policies.

Stylianides is not the commissioner in charge of energy affairs or climate action.

But the ones who are "commission vice-president Maros Sefcovic, and commissioner Miguel Arias Canete, respectively - happen not to be Cypriots, unlike Stylianides.

The EU's 28 commissioners are appointed by their national governments and are supposed to act in the pan-European interest.

However, they are often perceived through the nationality prism "German carmakers often want

to meet with German vice-president Guenther Oettinger, for example, who is responsible for the budget and human resources, not transport or the environment.

'Friendly, informal'... and very private

EUobserver had asked the commission to make public any minutes of the discussion, if they existed – but they did not.

Three of Cyprus' six members of the European Parliament confirmed they attended the dinner.

MEP Neoklis Sylikiotis told EUobserver that all Cypriot MEPs had been invited, to hear more about ExxonMobil's drilling programme in Cyprus' exclusive economic zone.

It was attended by Tristan Aspray, ExxonMobil's vice-president for Exploration in Europe.

"It was a friendly, informal discussion and we didn't take any minutes," said Sylikiotis, a member of the Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left.

His Cypriot colleague Takis Hadjigeorgiou, from the same far-left group, also confirmed his attendance, as did centre-left MEP Dimitris Papadakis.

"This was an informal meeting so no minutes were taken," said Papadakis.

An advisor to centre-left Cypriot MEP Costas Mavrides said he had not attended the dinner.

Two other Cypriot MEPs – Lefteris Christoforou of the European People's Party and Eleni Theocharous of the European Conservatives and Reformists group – did not reply to questions from this website.

A spokeswoman for the permanent representation of Cyprus to the EU in Brussels told EUobserver that its ambassador Nicolas Emiliou attended the dinner "in the framework of the contacts held between the government and all actors and companies, which are active in Cyprus".

She did not answer the question if minutes were kept. Other Cypriot civil servants reportedly also attended.

Restaurant with €1,000 membership fee

The dinner was held in the restaurant of an exclusive club in Brussels called De Warande, which is advertised on its website as a place "to discreetly have lunch and exchange ideas in an elegant and refined environment".

ExxonMobil refused to say how much the dinner had cost, if minutes were made, who attended, and why the meeting had not simply been held in an office during office hours.

"We do not comment on individual meetings, but we comply with all applicable transparency and reporting rules," said an ExxonMobil spokesman.

The Warande restaurant has no prices on its website, but after a call it emerged that dinners can only be reserved if one of the guests is a club member.

To become one, the club asks an entry fee of €1,000, followed by a €3,400 fee every three years.

Three-course meals are available to groups for €100 per person including the house wine € but excluding an aperitif € and four-course meals for €150 per person. This excludes the €1000 room rental.

Lobby transparency campaigner Margarida Silva told EUobserver that there is "nothing intrinsically wrong" with officials and MEPs accepting this dinner.

But the campaigner of the not-for-profit Corporate Europe Observatory organisation noted that ExxonMobil is not just any ordinary firm.

"We are talking about a company working in a controversial issue," she said.

ExxonMobil, an American multinational, is the world's largest oil and gas company.

Fossil fuel emissions are among the most important sources of human-induced global warming, and ExxonMobil has been heavily criticised for lobbying against climate action.

According to the EU lobbyists register, ExxonMobil spent between €100000 and €100000 in lobbying activities in Brussels in 2017. (It should be noted that entrants self-report figures voluntarily and there are few control mechanisms.)

Not against the rules

Campaigner Silva noted that the lack of note-taking raises questions and makes the meeting look secretive.

Moreover, she warned of the risk of EU officials and MEPs to meet with lobbyists over dinner because it is creating informal channels between policymakers and industry.

A dinner is a "very different setting" than an office meeting during the day, and it is something which civil society groups with smaller purses have fewer resources to organise.

"It would have been a good idea not to have this social interaction, but it is not against the rules," said Silva.

ExxonMobil € and its consortium partner Qatar Petroleum € signed an agreement with the Cypriot government in 2017 to carry out drilling off the island's coast.

Last July, Cypriot energy minister George Lakkotrypīs was quoted as saying that the procedures for Exxon to obtain the necessary permits were "proceeding as planned".

Kaynak/Source: