
LEADING MEP DEFENDS EXPENSES SECRECY

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The man tasked with making the European Parliament (EP) more transparent has said the general public should be more concerned about how MEPs are nominated than how they spend their monthly expenses.

Rainer Wieland, a German centre-right MEP who is also the parliament's vice-president and who is spearheading reforms to build public trust in the EP ahead of elections next year, spoke out in a frank interview with EUobserver last week.

His own political group, the EPP, recently adopted a resolution in Helsinki calling to make EU institutions more accountable and more open to public scrutiny.

But Wieland has long taken the view that MEPs should not have to disclose how they spend their monthly allowance - a sum worth €4,416 each a month, or €40m of taxpayers' money each year.

When asked what kind of message it sent to the public that he stood in contradiction to his own group line, Wieland replied: "I consider this as not really important".

Instead, he said people should be more concerned about how members are nominated, noting that some are selected personally by their party's leaders.

He disclosed that he himself pays part of his €4,416 a month allowance to his own law firm.

"I hired my two rooms as a local office from my law firm and I pay exactly my law firm what they pay to the landlord," he said.

It would create too much bureaucracy for MEPs to document their spending, he added, citing examples of parliament services collecting receipts for purchases of individual bananas.

Under current arrangements, MEPs get the money as a lump sum directly into their own personal bank accounts.

No receipts are kept, rendering oversight next to impossible.

Wieland is leading an EP working group tasked "to clarify and strengthen the existing rules and good practices" on how the money is spent.

The monthly allowance is meant to be spent on things like office supplies and other office expenses, but Wieland suggested that at least one former MEP had handed over unspent funds to

a political party, in violation of the rules.

"Years ago, I spoke to a member from a country which was just mentioned [The Netherlands] and I said: 'What if at the end of the year something is remaining?'. And this person said: 'Well, then I go to the post, buy stamps, and present it to the party'," noted Wieland.

He said it was cheaper for taxpayers to have the allowance paid out as a lump sum because it would take up to 40 additional EP staff to monitor a more detailed regime.

He also cited the MEPs' "freedom of mandate" in defence of his views - a legal principle that gives them wide berth to act independently of supervision.

British Labour and Tory party MEPs have published their monthly accounts online for years despite it.

But when asked by EUobserver whether their voluntary disclosure had somehow impaired the "freedom" of their work, Wieland said disclosure and non-disclosure were questions of different national cultures.

"We have a different political culture [in Germany] and I believe in the freedom of the mandate and I believe that the lump sum is cheaper," he said.

Some MEPs disagree, however.

Dutch left MEP Dennis de Jong told this website earlier this year that he pays an external auditor at most around €1,000 a year to ensure his accounts are clean.

"That didn't cost me a lot to have that done so why would civil servants working here in DG Fins [the EP's finance department] be more expensive than an external auditor?" he said.

Efforts to allow De Jong to publish those accounts on the European Parliament's own website have also been delayed as part of larger reforms of an internal rulebook for MEPs.

German Green deputy Sven Giegold had tabled a compromise on the rules, demanding that MEPs be allowed to voluntarily publish their audits on the parliament's homepage.

The costs of the audit, under his proposal, would be deducted from the monthly expense.

MEPs would be allowed to choose their own auditor, opening up the possibility for them to select someone who was friendly.

But in an emailed statement, Giegold told this website that the opacity of the current regime, also known as the general expenditure allowance, harms the EP's reputation.

"Since the president and the majority of vice-presidents continue to obstruct the implementation of the plenary's call for transparency, the plenary has to take back the process and write transparency of MEP's expenses directly into its rules of procedure," he said.

Giegold's compromise, along with two other demands to require some MEPs to meet only registered lobbyists and to publish details those meetings, are now to be voted on in the constitutional affairs committee (Afco) on Thursday (6 December).

The vote had been scheduled for last week, but was delayed following a late opinion delivered by

the European Parliament's legal service.

The opinion had already been delayed by weeks before that, posing questions on whether internal factions were aligned against it.

Kaynak/Source: