
'NO REAL PROGRESS' ON EUROGROUP TRANSPARENCY

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There is "no real progress" in attempts to make the Eurogroup more transparent, a member of the Dutch parliament told EUobserver.

"We are not making any headway with this file," said Renske Leijten, MP for the socialist party.

Almost a year ago, Leijten travelled to Brussels with two fellow Dutch MPs, to present Eurogroup president Mario Centeno with a list of recommendations to improve transparency.

They asked, on behalf of parliaments in 20 EU member states, that the Eurogroup would start to apply the EU's transparency regulation, which gives citizens the right to request documents.

Centeno promised to take their request seriously.

The Eurogroup is a powerful but technically informal body which consists of the eurozone's 19 finance ministers, their deputies, and a handful of EU officials like the European Commission members responsible for the euro and economic and financial affairs.

Confidential by design

This week, pressure group Transparency International published a critical report about the Eurogroup, arguing that it had been "designed to maximise confidentiality".

"Interview partners invariably made this point: the smaller number of participants in the Eurogroup fosters an atmosphere of collegiality and trust that is conducive to open discussions and consensus building," the report said.

"This justification runs into problems because of the greatly-expanded scope and reach of Eurogroup decisions," it added.

While the Eurogroup started out as an informal forum without much impact, it has become a key forum for decision-making since the euro crisis a decade ago.

Transparency International argued that the lack of transparency has exacerbated "power asymmetries" and allowed bigger member states to "twist arms" to make smaller states give up vetoes.

"While in theory the consensus requirement should protect the interests of smaller member states, in practice those states have a very limited ability to hold up proceedings or threaten a veto, especially if they are 'debtor' states," the report said.

Since MP Leijten handed the recommendations over to Centeno in February 2018, not much has changed.

The last major change in Eurogroup transparency was in 2016, when it started publishing agendas ahead of meetings and summary letters.

Since June 2018, the Eurogroup is also publishing lists of attendees of Eurogroup meetings.

Following a Eurogroup meeting in Vienna last September, Centeno told press that he had informed eurozone ministers "of my intention to look at the transparency initiative adopted by Eurogroup back in 2016, to consider if they can be further improved".

A month later, he wrote a letter to national parliaments informing them of his decision "to look into our transparency practices ... to see if there was anything we should improve".

"Once this work is completed, I would be happy to share the results with you," Centeno wrote.

However, a senior eurozone official said on Wednesday (6 February), on condition of anonymity, that no debate on transparency was scheduled.

"The president of the Eurogroup has sent just this report to the members of the Eurogroup and he will want to hear from them whether they want to go further," he said about the Transparency International report.

"Maybe there will be next steps, but that needs to be discussed first," the official said.

"Be assured that Centeno loves transparency, tries to make it more open," the contact noted, but added that it is ultimately up to all eurozone ministers to decide.

"We take this very seriously, but we need to really look at the recommendations and then it is up to the members: it is a member club."

Dutch finance minister Wopke Hoekstra wrote to MPs last November about Eurogroup transparency, stressing the same point that the support of the other eurozone ministers is needed.

"As you know, the Netherlands has been committed to transparency for many years and is often at the forefront of this topic," he wrote.

"The subject has the attention of the president and the government does not consider it appropriate at this time to (once again) insist on putting the subject on the agenda," Hoekstra wrote.

Dutch MPs will discuss Eurogroup transparency with their foreign minister, Stef Blok, next Wednesday.

"We will once again stress the importance of openness and transparency," said MP Leijten.

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