
EP BUDGET CHAIR SEEKS CLARITY ON SAUDI LOBBYING AND COLLEGE OF EUROPE

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24.02.2019

EU Observer (22 February 2019)

The EU-funded College of Europe must clarify its financial ties to Saudi Arabia, the chair of a powerful European Parliament (EP) budgetary committee has said.

The demand follows revelations last week by this website that the Saudis had paid the College of Europe to meet MEPs in a closed-door briefing at the EP as part of what the post-graduate institute describes as an "information or training exercise".

"This is clearly a type of action, which characterises a lobbyist organisation," said German centre-right MEP Ingeborg Graessle, who presides over the EP's budgetary control committee, in a letter sent on Wednesday (20 February) to College of Europe rector Jorg Monar and seen by EUobserver.

The Saudi-EP meeting on 19 February came less than a week after the EU parliament had passed a resolution condemning the abuse of human rights in Saudi Arabia.

It also followed recent moves by the European Union to put the Kingdom on a terror finance blacklist, as well as an arms embargo by Germany and several other EU states over the Saudi regime's murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi last October.

"Bearing in mind that the College of Europe receives funds from the EU budget, we as the discharge authority of the EU, need to have a clear picture of your undertakings in order to safeguard the interests of EU taxpayers," Graessle said in her letter.

The Bruges-based College of Europe received over €5m in EU funds for 2019.

Graessle's letter represented a sharp escalation in pressure for clarity, with Monar expected to respond before the EP votes on its budget discharge reports at the end of March.

The EP can grant discharges to EU institutions and agencies.

The College of Europe is neither of these, but if Graessle's committee were to find Monar's response unacceptable, MEPs could table an amendment to the discharge report demanding that the European Commission delayed funding for the post-graduate school.

It is unclear if the EU commission would follow such a demand, however.

Last week, a commission spokesperson said it "has no influence and no say in the college's training programmes".

Rector denies Saudi lobbying

Monar had already defended the Saudi project in a separate letter, also seen by this website, sent last week to Scottish Green MEP Alyn Smith.

"I would like to reassure you that this information visit has no public relations or lobbying exercise dimension to it," said Monar to Smith.

He said that the Saudi visit to Brussels was entirely funded by the Saudi government "with no direct or indirect cost arising for our (entirely separate) higher education budget."

Monar said topical EU issues, which included "EU security and defence cooperation", would be discussed, but he said it was not foreseen that the Saudi visitors would brief their EU interlocutors on Saudi positions or policies.

The closed-door EP meeting was held with MEPs dealing with Middle East affairs and was chaired by the former French defence minister, centre-right MEP Michele Alliot-Marie.

That meeting took place the same day that Khashoggi's fiancée made an impassioned plea for justice at the sub-committee for human rights in a different part of the EP building.

Alliot-Marie attended both the Saudi and the human rights talks.

Italian socialist MEP Pier Antonio Panzeri, who chairs human rights sub-committee, said that the Saudi meeting demonstrated the contradictions within the EP.

"This parliament should have a common position on that and this kind of behaviour should not be tolerated," he told EUobserver.

It is unclear which other EU officials or diplomat the College of Europe helped the Saudis to meet, but its programme spoke of meetings with "EU institutions as well as some permanent representations" between "18 and 22 February".

Permanent representations are EU member states embassies in Brussels.

Kaynak/Source: