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New Corruption Scandal Shakes the European Parliament

Several lobbyists were arrested some days ago and interviewed by investigators. The investigating judge and the federal prosecutor's office are reserving the possibility of any charges or arrest warrants pending their arrest.

What is the investigation about?

The Belgian justice system suspects that lobbyists working for Huawei have bribed MEPs, from 2021 to the present, in order to promote the Chinese giant's trade policy in European circles. This is particularly true in the context of accusations of espionage (especially by the United States) and limitations or bans on the use of its 5G technology on European soil. The federal prosecutor's office and a financial investigating judge arrested several (former) lobbyists linked to Huawei for questioning on Thursday and conducted around twenty searches. Some of the people arrested some days ago were expected to be brought before the financial investigating judge in charge of the investigation within 48 hours. But the federal prosecutor's office is not expected to announce any possible charges or arrest warrants before some days.

This investigation, opened on charges of "corruption", "money laundering", "forgery and use of forged documents" and "criminal organization", hits the European Parliament a little more than two years after the sensational Qatargate, which already concerned suspicions of influence in the European Parliament in exchange for money or gifts. But unlike Qatargate, suitcases stuffed with banknotes are not at stake: "Corruption is said to have been practiced regularly and very discreetly from 2021 to date, under the guise of commercial lobbying and taking different forms, such as remuneration for political positions or even excessive gifts, such as food expenses, travel or even regular invitations to football matches", specifies the federal prosecutor's office.

Who are the first suspects identified?

The federal prosecutor's office has so far only commented on the arrest of "several lobbyists," without specifying their number. According to information from *Le Soir* and its partners, the main suspect among them is a certain Valerio Ottati, 41, the director of public affairs for Huawei's office at the European Union since 2019. When contacted, his lawyer declined to comment at this stage.

The Belgian courts have also ordered the placing of judicial seals on two parliamentary assistants' office doors in the Brussels and Strasbourg Parliament buildings, with a view to a subsequent search. It is unclear in both cases who is the target of the judicial investigation: the assistants and/or the MPs for whom they work? The current MPs (two of them, an Italian and a Hungarian, began their first term last year) or the former MPs?

But one of the two offices is occupied by assistants working for an Italian MEP (Forza Italia, EPP), Fulvio Martusciello , who was the instigator of a letter co-signed in early 2021 by several Italian and Romanian elected officials calling on the European Commission not to "politicize" the 5G issue. Contacted, Mr. Martusciello replied that he had "never received anything from Huawei": "I have never been to China, nor to the stadium, nor received a smartphone or other benefits."

Mr. Martusciello is also linked to a Portuguese-born national, Nuno WM, who, according to our colleagues at the Lisbon newspaper *L'Expresso* , is the man who was arrested Thursday in France at the request of the Belgian authorities. His extradition to Belgium could take about ten days if he does not object, but several weeks otherwise. According to information available online, Nuno WM was in the past an advisor on European affairs to Fulvio Martusciello and his advisor as president of the European Parliament's Delegation to Israel (2016-2019).

What is Huawei's reaction?

The Chinese tech giant declared on Friday that it had "zero tolerance" for corruption following the revelation of the Belgian judicial investigation. "Huawei takes these allegations seriously and will communicate urgently with the investigators to better understand the situation," it added to AFP. In a statement, the Chinese embassy in Belgium indicated that it had "taken note" of the information: "The Chinese government has always asked Chinese nationals and companies abroad to respect the laws of the host countries," the embassy said. "At the same time, we firmly protect their legitimate and legal rights and interests. We urge the relevant authorities to act in accordance with the law, demonstrate fairness, justice, and openness, refrain from any presumption of guilt, and provide a fair, equitable, transparent, and non-discriminatory business environment for companies from China and all other countries."

In response to corruption allegations, the European Parliament announced on Friday that it was temporarily barring all lobbyists and representatives of the Chinese group Huawei from accessing its buildings in Brussels and Strasbourg. This was a "precautionary measure."

Why is no MEP being questioned at this stage?

According to Le Soir's information, investigators have around fifteen former or current MEPs on their radar for suspected corruption via Huawei lobbyists. But none are Belgian. Only the seals placed in the Altiero Spinelli building at this stage attest to the link established between this investigation and parliamentarians. For the most part, the investigative duties conducted this week concern lobbyists, therefore the alleged active corruptors. It must be noted that MEPs enjoy immunity that prevents any coercive action, such as a search, deprivation of liberty, or the establishment of telephone tapping, without first having lifted this parliamentary immunity. When Qatargate broke out on December 9, 2022, Eva Kaïli, then one of the vice-presidents of the assembly, was only searched and placed under arrest warrant after the judge considered that she had witnessed a flagrant offense with the exfiltration of a suitcase filled with banknotes.

A rare exception to the principle of immunity, the request for lifting of which is a procedure that takes several weeks within Parliament before a vote in plenary session.

MEPs Suspected of Inflating Their Expenses

Fulvio Martusciello (EPP/Italy) and **Giuseppe Ferrandino** (Independent/Italy) (an MEP and ex-MEP respectively) are suspected of having forged signatures in order to receive unduly daily allowances. The elected officials are alleged to have signed for one another attendance registers of the European Parliament so as to mutually cover their tracks and maximise the expenses they would have been entitled to receive.

The new accusations follow previous suspicion of their **involvement with Huawei, now under investigation by the Belgian authorities for bribing European officials**; Mr Martusciello had signed a letter endorsing the Chinese giants of 5G, ZTE and Huawei – as did Mr Ferrandino – to be the agents of the European Union's upgrading of telecoms across Europe. In addition to this, it appears that Mr Martusciello could be linked to a Portuguese jurist and lobbyist, taken in for questioning in France on March 13th regarding the new corruption scandal implicating Huawei.

Mr Ferrandino has not commented on the matter with the exception made to the Italian newspaper of note *La Repubblica* telling them that, *'If I have signed anything, I have done it in good faith.'*

Similarly, Mr Martusciello has similarly denied the allegations, responding to them by stating that:

'This is about a question dating to around four years ago which has since been sorted by the European Parliament. I do not have any more information...'

'I have never received anything from Huawei, I have never been to China, I have never gone

It remains to be seen what is yet to come to light.



“Just like you, like our citizens, I am dismayed that members of this Assembly are being investigated for allegedly accepting bribes in exchange for their votes. Nothing is more contrary to what this institution represents. As you mention in your letter, we must act consistently and convincingly in order to reassure our citizens that these events are in no way our modus operandi, neither with regard to Parliament nor, indeed, the associative world. I put all my efforts into it.”

Answer of **President Metsola** to **President Gaetano Stella** in July 2023 following a letter sent by CEPLIS with regards to the then-unravelling Qatargate.

SME Envoy Network Meeting – The European Commission Decides Not to Appoint an SME Envoy Despite Von der Leyen’s Promise – Simplification and Market Integration

On March 20th, CEPLIS participated in the first SME Envoy Network meeting of 2025. This meeting was an opportunity for all stakeholders to take stock of the announcements and achievements of the new European Commission during its first 100 days in office.

Relating to the current legislative Agenda, European Commission officers presented the first and second Omnibus packages, part of the efforts to simplify and better regulate businesses and to reduce their reporting burden by at least 25% by as soon as June 2025. Participants were informed that the Commission would likely present up to five packages by the end of 2025.



The participants reviewed the 28th Regime, which aims to facilitate cross-border business establishment. On this occasion, CEPLIS, represented by Policy Advisor Baptiste Deprez, urged the European Commission to extend the proposal to all types of business, not only start-ups, to ensure that the 28th Regime benefits the entire Union’s economy.

The 2025 Single Market Strategy was also high on the Agenda. Proof of that importance, some Member States decided to share with the participants non-papers prepared by their ministries on the subject. CEPLIS took the opportunity to remind the European Commission that, in a time of widespread skill shortages, it was crucial importance to improve the implementation of the Directive on the Automatic Recognition of Professional Qualifications.

On a concluding note, the European Commission also informed the attendees that Executive Vice-President Stéphane Séjourné had decided not to appoint an SME Envoy, despite what was announced in 2024 by Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen. To explain this decision, the Commission argued that Stéphane Séjourné already defined himself as an SME Envoy, thus not requiring a dedicated individual.

As a reminder, Ursula Von der Leyen very publicly put forward in 2023 the idea of appointing an official to SMEs to better take into account the particularities and priorities of SMEs. Following transparency concerns surrounding the nomination of **Marcus Pieper** and his resignation in April 2024, the European Commission’s President had promised to pick a new individual at the very beginning of her second mandate. Several organisations active in the field have already expressed their disappointed with this decision, which goes against the displayed political priority of the Commission to promote the dynamism of SMEs. **As the grim state of the European economy is at the top of the agenda, sidelining SMEs, an essential pillar of the economy, risks undermining efforts to put the Union back on the path of economic growth.**

European Commission Launches Helpdesk to Support EU SMEs Comply with Sanctions



The European Commission has launched a new one-stop-shop providing vital support to European small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) navigating the complex landscape of sanctions compliance.

The EU Sanctions Helpdesk will offer a comprehensive range of services designed to help SMEs comply with EU sanctions worldwide, reducing the risk of non-compliance, and associated costs. The EU has over 40 sanctions regimes globally. The Helpdesk will provide personalised support to EU SMEs performing sanctions due diligence checks - at no cost to the companies as well as managing a dedicated website featuring sanctions-related information, country-specific guidance, events, tips, lessons learned, and more.

All UN and EU restrictive measures are to be covered by the Helpdesk, providing SMEs with the necessary information to manage the challenges of sanctions compliance with confidence. This can assist European operators in avoiding the loss of legitimate business opportunities due to uncertainties about their legality. While there are instances where larger entities can benefit from support, the Helpdesk's focus is on SMEs as they typically have fewer compliance resources than large companies.

The Helpdesk will work with partners including public authorities, business support stakeholders, financial institutions, and international sanctions and compliance organisations. Through these partnerships the Helpdesk will participate in joint outreach and awareness-raising activities, host and attend events, and deliver training sessions.

EU restrictive measures (sanctions) are an essential tool in the EU's common foreign and security policy. The EU now has over 40 sanctions regimes globally containing a wide range of restrictive measures, from targeted individual measures (e.g. asset freezes) to more comprehensive sectoral approaches (targeting finance, trade, energy, etc.). With increasing worldwide tensions, EU restrictive measures are expanding at a more rapid pace.

This complexity can generate risk aversion, which in some instances may lead to de-risking practices. As a result, compliance needs are soaring. The EU Sanctions Helpdesk aims to build compliance practices while combatting over-compliance, build confidence for financial and business partners and reduce compliance costs.

CEPLIS Addresses the 20th Cascais International Health Forum



From the 20th to the 21st of March, CEPLIS has attended and addressed the 20th Cascais International Health Forum, bringing together health professionals and policymakers from around the world. With 8 Main Conferences, 9 Plenary Session and 30 Parallel Session hosting over 200 Speakers and 2000 Participants, this gathering of the best and brightest minds in healthcare was a meeting of minds aiming to find innovative solutions to the most pressing issues faced by patients and health professionals through collaboration and exchange.

Our Director-General, **Dr Theodoros Koutroubas**, Professor at the Catholic University of Louvain, was invited as a main speaker at a Plenary Session on Healthcare Workforce Challenges. Professor Koutroubas was joined by: **Miguel Guimarães**, Member of the Portuguese Parliament, Vice-President of the PSD Parliamentary Group and Former President of Portuguese Medical Association; **Orlando Monteiro da Silva**, President of the Portuguese Association of Liberal Professionals and former Chairman for the Portuguese Order of Oral Physicians; **Professor Inês Fronteira** of ENSP NOVA, President of the Portuguese Epidemiology Association, advisor to the National Ethics Council for Life Sciences (CNECV) and member of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the European Health Management Association.

As many of you are aware, the workforce of the healthcare sector internationally faces many common, multi-faceted challenges; the Forum was thus a welcome event to discuss our common issues and how we can best tackle them head-on and resolve them to ensure continued excellence of care for patients and continued quality for the liberal professionals working tirelessly in this essential sector.



Professor Dr Koutroubas, DG of CEPLIS takes the stage