

EU petition on Barroso's Goldman Sachs job signed by more than 150,000

Declaration says former European commission president 'morally reprehensible' for joining US bank



José Manuel Barroso took a role at Goldman Sachs to advise clients on Brexit. Photograph: Francois Lenoir/Reuters

Jennifer Rankin in Brussels

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More than 150,000 people have signed an EU staff petition demanding that the former European commission president José Manuel Barroso loses his pension for taking a job at Goldman Sachs.

A delegation will present the petition on Wednesday to the main EU institutions: the commission, parliament and council, which represents EU governments.

Nearly 152,000 people have put their name to the declaration, which accuses Barroso of “morally reprehensible” behaviour over his decision to join the US investment bank. Since its launch by a handful of EU employees in July, the petition has spread far beyond Brussels staff, becoming a lightning rod for concerns about senior politicians taking lucrative private sector jobs.

The petition comes ahead of a keenly awaited investigation by an EU ethics committee into Barroso's job. A three-person panel, comprising an ex-EU judge, ex-MEP and ex-official, will advise the commission on whether Barroso broke the EU's code of conduct, which states that

ex-commissioners must act with “integrity and discretion” during and after they have left office.

Barroso, who led the commission for a decade until 2014, took a job at Goldman Sachs in July to advise the bank’s clients on Brexit.

The current commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker, questioned his predecessor’s decision, saying he did not have a problem with Barroso “working for a private bank - but maybe not this bank”. The New York-based bank has come under fire for its role in helping the Greek government hide the extent of its budget deficit, as well as selling sub-prime mortgages, a trigger of the global financial crisis.

Barroso and the bank have strongly refuted claims of any unethical behaviour. Such claims are “baseless and wholly unmerited ... discriminatory against me and against Goldman Sachs”, Barroso wrote to Juncker in September.

Goldman Sachs has also stressed that it followed “strict rules” set by global regulators. “José Manuel took the role after an 18-month restriction period following the end of his term at the European commission, a longer period than that imposed by most European institutions”.

The EU staff, who have drafted the petition, are calling for tighter rules on politicians moving into the corporate sector, once they have left their EU jobs.

These calls have been broadly backed by the EU ombudsman, Emily O’Reilly, who has argued that the right to work should be balanced by “the public right to an ethical administration”.

Speaking to the Guardian and European newspapers recently, she said: “You could have a much stronger code of conduct pour encourager les autres.”

O’Reilly, who has also served as Ireland’s national ombudsman, argues the EU should eventually set up an independent body to oversee appointments of ex-officials, similar to Ireland’s Standards in Public Office Commission. “That is the natural progression, that it moves away from the commission and other institutions themselves.”

She predicted the Barroso case would have a permanent impact on the EU institutions. “Nothing has ever been so big, or has captured the public imagination in the same way. I think eventually this [case] will make the commission deal with the revolving doors issue in a more serious way.”

One of the petition organisers suggested their action had set a precedent that would make ex-politicians think twice before taking certain corporate jobs. “It is a precedent, in the culture of the EU institutions this will remain.”

The official said it was the first time EU staff had publicised criticism of their former bosses for actions, which they argue, have tarnished the EU’s image. “We are deeply committed to the European Union and we want to defend it.”

The petition organisers, who wish to remain anonymous, will be represented at handover by a group of retired EU officials and staff unions. At the same time, campaigners from Transparency International and the Alliance for Lobby Transparency and Ethics Regulation, will deliver a separate petition criticising the “revolving door between the European commission and big business”.

The commission's ethics panel is also investigating Neelie Kroes, the former EU competition commissioner, who failed to declare a directorship in an offshore firm, in breach of commission rules.

The panel is expected to take around six to eight weeks to reach a conclusion on both cases.

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