



Brussels' revolving door problem: Why the European Commission's response is inadequate

On Wednesday 24 November, the Alliance for Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Regulation (ALTER-EU) launched [a new campaign to tackle the 'revolving door' in Brussels](#). Many EU officials go through the 'revolving door' meaning that they leave their EU job and soon start working for industry or lobby firms, often in the same policy area. Other times, lobbyists go through the revolving door and start to work for the EU institutions.

ALTER-EU demands tough, new rules to block the revolving door, as well as proactive implementation of these rules. New rules would include:

- A ban of at least two years for all EU staff from becoming lobbyists
- New rules to regulate lobbyists who join the EU institutions
- Full transparency about all revolving door cases

Our campaign is particularly focussed on [Commissioner Šefčovič](#) who is responsible for the Staff Regulations and since we launched the campaign, Commissioner Šefčovič and his spokesperson have responded to us publicly. Below we set out these responses and demonstrate why we consider that, so far, Commissioner Šefčovič does not appear to be taking this important issue seriously.

EU officials are already subject to "very strict" rules. At the same time, "we cannot prohibit someone from continuing to work in his field of expertise. What counts is to avoid conflicts of interest". (Commissioner Šefčovič's press spokesperson, 24.11.11)

ALTER-EU response: If the rules were "very strict", we would not see so many officials who ignore the rules and work in lobbying jobs without securing the correct authorisations (see [ALTER-EU report](#) and the cases of Derek Taylor, Thomas Lönngren and Petra Erler). Nor would we see the loopholes in the rules which allow staff who have worked at the Commission for several years excluded from systematically requiring authorisation under the rules, just because they are on a temporary contract (see [ALTER-EU report](#) and the case of the Mårten Westrup).

But most importantly, if the rules were strict and if they really did work to prevent conflicts of interest, we would not see officials, many of them with decades of EU institution experience, able to swiftly move into senior lobby jobs, often involving the same policy areas, without serious restriction (see [ALTER-EU report](#) and many cases including Mogens Peter Carl, Bruno Dethomas, Jean-Philippe Monod de Froideville and many others).

ALTER-EU does not demand that the Commission prohibits an official from continuing to work in his / her field of expertise after they leave office, but there needs to be a clear avoidance of conflicts of interest. Robust revolving door rules would prevent certain staff from accepting a limited category of lobby jobs for a period of up to two years. There will be many other employment options which would not be affected by revolving door rules.

“I've seen some critical media reports about this [revolving door issue] last week. I have your letter and ALTER-EU will get a detailed response... Temporary agents should be able to find new work in the fields where they are experts. The Commission should not be a closed shop. We were criticised for being a closed shop in the past and now we have opened it up. What is important is proportionality. We should work hard to avoid conflicts of interest and privileged information. We cannot track what thousands of pensioners are doing but if there are individual cases we will look at them. These people are bound by the staff regulations. For Commissioners, they actually have the longest cooling off period in the world.” (Commissioner Šefčovič speaking at Open Europe debate on 29 November 2011. Comments should be checked against event transcript).

ALTER-EU response: Commissioner Šefčovič refers to one of ALTER-EU's criticisms regarding temporary contract staff and the fact that they are not automatically covered by the current EU revolving door rules, unless they are found to have had access to “sensitive information”. But it is not clear how the Commission defines “sensitive information” and what relevance this has to conflicts of interest which is a much broader consideration. Additionally, contract staff can be subject to conflicts of interest in just the same way that permanent officials can, perhaps more so. Temporary agents should not be excluded from conflicts of interest rules.

Besides, [ALTER-EU's report](#) is not just about temporary agents; instead it sets out a whole range of weaknesses within the current revolving door rules, and the way in which they are implemented.

To respond directly to the Commissioner, ALTER-EU does not think that the Commission should be a closed shop. It is important that the EU institutions benefit from a workforce who bring with them experience from many different walks of life, including people who have had experience of working in the public sector, private sector and civil society. But it is also important that the EU institutions are vigilant in preventing conflicts of interest which occur as a result of the revolving door. Yet the Commission does not seem to take the revolving door seriously. Staff who do not follow the rules receive no sanction, the rules seem to be rarely applied effectively, there seems to be no proactive monitoring and enforcement of the rules, and there is no transparency around this issue.

For more information on this campaign, check out: <http://www.alter-eu.org/revolving-doors>

Before the launch of the ALTER-EU campaign on the revolving doors, ALTER-EU member [Corporate Europe Observatory](#) wrote to the Commission regarding the lack of transparency around revolving doors. This was a concern which ALTER-EU also reflected in its [report](#). In its reply to CEO, the Commission says: “I would like to point out that the Commission already ensures far-reaching transparency in the application of Article 16 of the Staff Regulations”.

ALTER-EU response: ALTER-EU is extremely surprised by this response from the Commission as, in our view, there is little transparency around the revolving door, even though both ALTER-EU and MEPs have asked for it. There is no published list of officials who have applied for authorisation for new roles under Article 16 and it is also not always straight-forward to gain information about individuals' authorisations under Access to Documents rules. Transparency is a key way to raise the profile of revolving door rules, ensure they are followed, and prevent their abuse. The Commission should take a proactive approach to transparency in this area.

ALTER-EU, January 2012