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Group leaders to question Barroso over code of conduct for commissioners

By Constant Brand

20.01.2011 / 05:10 CET

MEPs say some ex-commissioners are cashing in on their Commission experience.

The European Parliament's political leaders are to interrogate José Manuel Barroso, the president of the European Commission, about changes that he is proposing to the code of conduct for European commissioners.

According to Parliament officials, a special meeting is being scheduled for 8 or 9 February. Barroso's appearance before the Parliament's Conference of Presidents – the leaders of the political groups – risks becoming an occasion for finger-pointing by MEPs, who complain that some ex-commissioners are cashing in on their Commission experience with lobbyists and business groups.

Barroso is proposing to extend from 12 to 18 months the 'cooling-off' period after a commissioner leaves office. In that period a commissioner has to obtain the approval of the Commission before taking up a new job. The Commission is advised by a three-member ethics committee, which is supposed to guard against potential conflicts of interest. Barroso is proposing that the non-binding recommendations of the committee should be made public, to give it more legitimacy and authority.

Lobbying restrictions

Further proposed changes to the code would forbid ex-commissioners from lobbying the Commission for 18 months in any policy area that he or she handled when in office. Other changes to the code would prevent spouses and partners and other direct family members from working for commissioners and stricter rules on what gifts commissioners can accept when in office.

Barroso promised MEPs in 2009, when he was seeking reappointment as Commission president, that there would be changes to the code.

In a letter setting out the proposed change sent to Jerzy Buzek, the president of the Parliament, Barroso said that the revised code "reflects best practices in the field of ethics regulations for public office holders" and said that it set "the highest standards of ethical integrity". Barroso appealed to MEPs to draft a common code of conduct for all EU institutions.

MEPs and other groups pushing for tougher conduct rules for EU officials remain sceptical as to whether the proposed changes go far enough. Ingeborg Gräßle, a German centre-right MEP, said that the cooling-off period for ex-commissioners should be three years in length.

"I am sorry to say but this draft does not address the main problems that popped up in the last four or five years," she said.

Gräßle has also been prominent among MEPs seeking a change to the separate regulation on salaries and allowances for commissioners, after revelations that several members of the 2004-10 Commission were still receiving a generous transitional allowance, despite having taken up other well-paid posts.

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Grässle said that the Commission should convince the Council of Ministers to change the regulation to stop the transitional pay-outs.

Paul de Clerck from Friends of the Earth Europe, a campaign group, said there were still too many loopholes in the code and urged MEPs to put pressure on the Commission to strengthen it further.

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