

Brussels, 30 April 2024

Dear Secretary-General Ilze Juhansone,

We are writing to express our concern about Commission President von der Leyen's interactions with equine industry lobbyists, as described by *Politico* in the 23 March 2024 article "[Von der Leyen and the dark horse lobby](#)". The Commission spokesperson's statements to *Politico* on the matter indicate a flawed interpretation of EU transparency rules. It appears to us that Commission President von der Leyen's interactions with the European Horse Network very clearly violated the Code of Conduct for Commissioners (Article 7).[1] We are therefore asking you to assess this matter and take action to ensure that Commission presidents completely fulfill the transparency obligations in the Code of Conduct for Commissioners.

As *Politico* reports, President von der Leyen has on several occasions during her mandate — most recently in 2023 — addressed the European Horse Network (EHN), a lobby group for the equine industry.[2] Yet the meetings, held in conjunction with the MEP Horse Group, appear neither on the President's public calendar nor on her log of meetings with interest representatives. *Politico* quotes Arianna Podesta, the Commission's deputy chief spokesperson, who confirmed the President's participation in the meetings, but claimed they don't count as meetings with interest representatives that need to appear in the log of lobbyist meetings. Apparently because the events at the Parliament were part of the MEP Horse Group, they count as "an activity where the Commission plays its classical 'institutional communication' role," Podesta told *Politico*. These events also did not appear in the President's public calendar (which holds no record of meetings with the MEP Horse Group, the EHN, or the MEP heading the group).

We disagree with the statements by the Commission spokesperson. The [MEP Horse Group](#) is not an official European Parliament [intergroup](#). It has no status vis-a-vis the Parliament, it has no separate legal status from the EHN, but is fully integrated in the EHN, and is used as a lobbying vehicle by the group.[3] Describing the President's attendance at EHN / MEP Horse Group events as "institutional communication" therefore makes no sense. The President's interactions with the EHN and the MEP Horse Group should have been disclosed both in the log of meetings with interest representatives and in the public calendar. Do you share this analysis? If the Commission insists there was no obligation to disclose the meetings, this creates a dangerous transparency loophole and as *Politico* calls it, it would be "a playbook for stealth lobbying at the EU executive".

A no less serious transparency failure was the fact that the President attended the EHN events despite the fact that the organisation was not registered in the EU transparency register at the time, and when registration is a prerequisite for meetings with top Commission officials. The EHN's transparency register entry expired in 2019, according to the [LobbyFacts database](#) and emails from the transparency register secretariat. An active EHN entry [went live only on the day](#) *Politico* published its article, sparked by questions by *Politico*. EHN [was registered](#) from April 2014 to April 2019. It was removed from the register "for failure to provide the obligatory annual update," the transparency register secretariat told Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) in a February 2022 email.[4] CEO complained again about EHN's absence to the transparency register secretariat earlier this year, and it replied that it had sent EHN a new invitation to register, back in April 2022 (which the EHN had not responded to).

It seems obvious to us that the President should not have agreed to attend, on several occasions, meetings hosted by an unregistered lobby group. The President should clearly lead by example. Instead, the Commission should have used the opportunity to insist that the EHN rejoins the transparency register. It is particularly problematic that the President

attended the EHN event in the Parliament in June 2023 which was after the register secretariat had contacted the unregistered group and urged them to register. Attending this event gave the EHN the message that lobby transparency is unimportant.

We suggest that you initiate an assessment of what went wrong in these unfortunate events. The EHN's absence from the transparency register also violated Parliament rules, a matter that we will take up with the Parliament.[5] Considering this double failure by the President to fulfill key transparency obligations, we would like to ask what action the Commission will take to ensure proper adherence to transparency rules by Presidents in the future? There seems to be a need for clearer guidance, better briefings and perhaps training for Presidents and their cabinet members. Appointing an ethics guardian who can assist the President should be considered.

We note the President's transparency pledges in her political guidelines for the current Commission: "If Europeans are to have faith in our Union, its institutions should be open and beyond reproach on ethics, transparency and integrity"... "Citizens should know who we, as the institutions who serve them, meet and discuss with and what positions we defend in the legislative process."

We look forward to your responses to our concerns and questions.

Yours sincerely,

Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO)
Transparency International EU
LobbyControl
The Good Lobby

Notes:

1) [Code of Conduct for Commissioners](#) (Article 7):

"1. Members and their members of Cabinet shall meet only those organisations or self-employed individuals, which are registered in the Transparency Register established pursuant to the Interinstitutional agreement (2) on this matter between the European Parliament and the Commission inasmuch as they fall under its scope.

2. They shall make public information on such meetings in accordance with the Commission Decision 2014/839/EU, Euratom (3)"

2) On [15 October 2019](#), two weeks before Von der Leyen formally became Commission President, she addressed the EHN and the MEP Horse Group. There was [another meeting on 16 November 2021](#). The most recent meeting attended by the Commission President appears to have [happened on 8 June 2023](#). During this meeting, according to the EHN website, the President sought to "reaffirm" her support and assured that their "needs will be taken into account".

3) The [EHN makes clear on its website](#) that it organises the meetings of the MEP Horse Group. MEP Vautmans, chair of the MEP Horse Group, [confirmed to Politico](#) that "EHN decides on the list of the external speakers for the meetings." This [EHN press release from 15 July 2019](#) also clearly shows the symbiotic relation between the two structures: "*The European Horse Network has confirmed Belgian MEP, Mrs Hilde Vautmans as the new Chairwoman of the European Parliament's MEP Horse Group. The MEP Horse Group was founded in 2011 by British MEP Julie Girling, as a part of the European Horse Network (EHN), with the aim of bringing greater visibility to the horse sector on the European political agenda.*"

4) On 19 April 2022 the transparency register secretariat wrote back to Corporate Europe Observatory confirming that the European Horse Network "as a network of stakeholders can be considered an interest representation organisation covered by the scope of the IIA" and informed me that "this organisation had been registered until 2019 when it was removed for failure to provide the obligatory annual update. As you

have indicated, the organisation still carries out relevant activities, and therefore it ought to have an active entry in the Transparency Register. As a result, the Secretariat is now in the process of contacting the organisation regarding their registration."

Following a reminder to the secretariat, the following response was received on 15 March 2024: "In your previous communication, you alleged that the network is absent from the Transparency Register despite engaging in activities covered by Article 3 of the Interinstitutional Agreement of 20 May 2021 between the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission on a mandatory transparency register ('IIA') and requested an update on the matter. The Secretariat is actively engaged in awareness raising and outreach activities in the framework of which it regularly explains and promotes the Transparency Register. In this context, and further to your message, the Secretariat contacted the European Horse Network on 19 April 2022 with a view to informing them that they are eligible to register insofar as they carry out activities covered by Article 3 of the IIA and that prior registration would be required where [conditionality measures](#) apply in the signatory institutions."

5) [Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament](#), Rule 35 (December 2019): "5. Only interest representatives who are registered in the Transparency register may participate in intergroup or other unofficial grouping activities organised on Parliament's premises, for instance by attending meetings or events of the intergroup or other unofficial grouping, by offering support to it, or by co-hosting its events." Clearly the MEP Horse Group / EHN were in violation of the rules and shouldn't have been allowed to host events inside the Parliament, and the Commission President shouldn't have attended and so strongly endorsed these groups.