



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 8 November 2016
(OR. en)

13477/16

INF 179
API 104

NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Working Party on Information
Subject: Public access to documents
- Confirmatory application No 23/c/08/16

Delegations will find attached the:

- request for access to documents sent to the General Secretariat of the Council on 6 September 2016 and registered on the same day ([Annex 1](#));
- reply from the General Secretariat of the Council dated 18 October 2016 ([Annex 2](#));
- confirmatory application dated 19 October 2016 and registered the same day ([Annex 3](#))

[E-mail message sent to access@consilium.europa.eu on 6 September 2016 - 14:29]

From: **DELETED**

Sent: Tuesday, 6 September 2016 14:29

To: SECRETARIAT DGF Access

Subject: RE: Ref. 16/1671-ws/mw

Thank you very much for your letter and the large amount of documents to which access has been provided.

In your letter it is indicated that certain documents were identified, but could not be fully assessed within the required timeframe.

Therefore I would kindly ask you to provide me with the following additional documents:

Room document 7 annex of 05.02.2009

Room document 4 of 23.09.2009

Room documents 6 and 6 annex3 of 20.05.2010

Room documents 2, 2 annex of 17.02.2011

Room document 7 of 17.04.2012

Room document 6 annex4 of 04.06.2012

Room documents 4, 5 of 30.01.2013

Room document 7 of 20.03.2013

Room document 5 of 22.10.2013

Room document 1 of 22.01.2014

Room documents 4, 4 annex1, 4 annex2, 4 annex3, 9 of 03.06.2014

Room documents 4, 4 annex of 22.10.2014

Room document 9 of 07.04.2015

Room documents 2 annex, 6, 6 annex, 6 REV1, 7, 7 annex, 8 of 02.06.2015

Room documents 1, 5 of 21.10.2015

Room document 6 of 18.11.2015

Thank you very much for your assistance and all the hard work.

Best,

DELETED



Council of the European Union

General Secretariat

Directorate-General Communication and Information

Knowledge Management

Transparency

Head of Unit

Brussels, 18 October 2016

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Email: **DELETED**

Ref. 16/1841-mw

Request made on: 06.09.2016

Deadline extension: 27.09.2016

Dear **DELETED**,

Thank you for your request for access to documents of the Council of the European Union.¹

1. Full access is granted to the following documents

Please find attached the following documents of Code of Conduct group meetings:

Room document 4 of 23.09.2009;

Room documents 6 and 6 annex3 of 20.05.2010;

Room document 6 annex4 of 04.06.2012 (which is an extract of room document 4 of 23.09.2009);

Room documents 2 annex, 6, 6 REV1, 6 annex, 7 of 02.06.2015;

Room document 1 of 21.10.2015;

Room document 6 of 18.11.2015.

¹ The General Secretariat of the Council has examined your request on the basis of the applicable rules: Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001 of the European Parliament and of the Council regarding public access to European Parliament, Council and Commission documents (OJ L 145, 31.5.2001, p. 43) and the specific provisions concerning public access to Council documents set out in Annex II to the Council's Rules of Procedure (Council Decision No 2009/937/EU, OJ L 325, 11.12.2009, p. 35).

2. Partial access is granted to the following documents

You will also find attached partially accessible versions of the following documents².

However, I regret to inform you that full access cannot be given for the reasons set out below.

Room document 7 annex of 05.02.2009;

Room documents 4 and 5 of 30.01.2013;

Room document 5 of 22.10.2013;

Room document 4 of 22.10.2014;

Room document 9 of 07.04.2015;

Room document 8 of 02.06.2015;

Room document 5 of 21.10.2015.

3. Access cannot be granted to the following documents

I regret to inform you that access to the following documents cannot be given for the reasons set out below:

Room documents 2, 2 annex of 17.02.2011;

Room document 7 of 17.04.2012;

Room documents 4 annexes 1, 2 and 3 of 03.06.2014;

Room document 4 annex of 22.10.2014;

Room document 7 annex of 02.06.2015.

These room documents (points 2 and 3 above) concern difficult tax issues and contain informally voiced internal opinions and assessments related to tax measures. The General Secretariat considers that (full) release of this information would trigger reactions by businesses which would interfere with the economic and fiscal policy of the European Union and of the Member States. It would therefore undermine the protection of the public interest as regards the financial, monetary or economic policy of the EU and of the Member States.³

The General Secretariat also considers that (full) access to these documents must be refused as release of this information would jeopardise the negotiating process and thus seriously undermine the decision making-process concerned.⁴

² Article 4(6) of Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001.

³ Article 4(1)(a), fourth indent, of Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001.

⁴ Article 4(3) of Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001.

Having examined the contexts in which the documents were drafted and the current state of play on these matters, on balance the General Secretariat could not identify any evidence suggesting an overriding public interest in their disclosure.

Moreover, the General Secretariat considers that (full) disclosure of the following documents would not only undermine the protection of the public interest as regards the financial, monetary or economic policy of the EU and of the Member States and the decision making-process concerned but also negatively affect the EU's relations with third parties.

Room documents 4, 5 of 30.01.2013;
Room document 5 of 22.10.2013;
Room documents 4 Annexes 1, 2 and 3 of 03.06.2014;
Room documents 4, 4 annex of 22.10.2014;
Room document 7 annex of 02.06.2015.

(Full) Disclosure of these documents would therefore also undermine the protection of the public interest as regards international relations. As a consequence, the General Secretariat has to refuse (full) access to these documents.⁵

We have also looked into the possibility of releasing parts of each of these documents.⁶
Documents for which a partial access is granted are listed at point 2 above.

However, as the exceptions to the right of access apply to their entire content, the General Secretariat is unable to give partial access.

4. Room document 7 annex of 05.02.2009

Room document 7 annex of 05.02.2009 is the Deloitte study commissioned by the Commission. It contains names, signatures and/or contact details of individuals.

The General Secretariat considers that disclosure of the personal data contained in the document would undermine the protection of privacy and the integrity of the identified individual. As a consequence, the General Secretariat has to refuse full access to this document.⁷

⁵ Article 4(1)(a), third indent, of Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001.

⁶ Article 4(6) of Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001.

⁷ Article 4(1)(b) of Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001.

5. Ongoing consultations

Finally, the following documents were identified, but could not be fully assessed within the required timeframe:

Room document 7 of 20.03.2013;

Room document 1 of 22.01.2014;

Room documents 4, 9 of 03.06.2014.

It should be noted that the present decision does not preclude you from introducing another initial request for these documents.

You can ask the Council to review this decision within 15 working days of receiving this reply (confirmatory application).⁸

Yours sincerely,

Fernando PAULINO PEREIRA

Enclosures

⁸

Article 7(2) of Regulation (EC) No 1049/2001.

Council documents on confirmatory applications are made available to the public. Pursuant to data protection rules at EU level (Regulation (EC) No 45/2001), if you make a confirmatory application your name will only appear in related documents if you have given your explicit consent.

[E-mail message sent to access@consilium.europa.eu on 19 October 2016 - 12:06]

From: **DELETED**

Sent: Wednesday, October 19, 2016 12:06

To: SECRETARIAT DGF Access

Subject: RE: Ref. 16/1841-mw

Enclosed my confirmatory application on your letter of October 18, 2016.

Sincerely,

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Council of the European Union
Jakob Thomsen
Transparency
Rue de la Loi 175/Wetstraat 175
1048 Bruxelles/Brussel,
Belgium

Re: Confirmatory application No 16/1841-mw

Dear Mr Thomsen,

1. In taking its decisions the Council invoked the various material grounds for exception laid down in Article 4(1) to (3) of the Transparency Regulation.
2. A general objection to the way in which the Council has used those material grounds for exception is that in respect of a large number of documents it refers to such grounds without clearly stating that each document has been subject to a specific examination although it is required to do so under established case-law.
3. Furthermore, the Council has in essence applied the material grounds for exception, two in particular, incorrectly. The exceptions in question are the fourth indent of Article 4(1)(a) and the first subparagraph of Article 4(3) of the Transparency Regulation on (i) protecting the public interest in relation to financial, monetary or economic policy and (ii) avoiding undermining the institution's decision-making process in relation to decisions that have yet to be taken.

'Protection of the public interest as regards financial, monetary or economic policy'

4. In taking its decisions the Council appears to invoke the material grounds for exception concerning the protection of the public interest as regards the financial, monetary or economic policy of the Union or a Member State, as referred to in Article 4(1)(a), fourth indent, of the Transparency Regulation. As regards the way in which it did that, I have the following objection.
5. The Council did not properly assess the applicability of the material ground for exception and in any case did not provide appropriate justification. With the documents in question, it is not clear, at least not immediately, how disclosure would damage the public interest as regards financial, monetary or economic policy. Hence the ground for refusal cited here cannot be invoked without justification which is, however, lacking.
6. The material grounds for exception must be strictly interpreted and applied. As regards the material ground for exclusion here, the significance of this principle under established case-law is that it applies only if the risk of the interest in question being undermined is reasonably foreseeable. In other words, the risk should be real and not purely hypothetical. The fact that a document concerns an interest protected by an exception is therefore not enough in itself to apply this ground for exception.
7. While the room documents which I requested do touch on the financial, and possibly also the monetary, policy of the European Union and the Member States, it is unclear how disclosure of the documents in question might do real damage to that interest. I am therefore of the opinion that the Council has applied the material ground for exception too generally and thus wrongly. In any event I find the justification given completely inadequate.

'Protection of the decision-making process'

8. In its decision the Council appears to invoke the material ground for exception regarding the protection of the decision-making process in respect of documents relating to decisions not yet taken, as referred to in Article 4(3), first paragraph, of the Transparency Regulation. (The second paragraph of this article does not seem to have been invoked by the Council). I have two objections to the way in which the Council deals with this material ground for exception.
9. Firstly, the Council uses the wrong criterion. Pursuant to the first paragraph of Article 4(3) of the Transparency Regulation, the disclosure of documents is to be refused if it would seriously undermine the decision-making process in respect of decisions not yet taken. However, according to the reasons it gave, instead of checking whether (how) this was the case, the Council simply applied the material ground for exception. To summarise the Council's argument, the documents in question concern thorny tax issues and contain statements by the participants in the discussions as well as evaluations of tax measures. This not an argument that can be used to justify the existence of a serious obstacle, but is rather a categorical exclusion of documents. The Transparency Regulation makes no provision for this, nor can it be regarded as containing one.
10. Secondly, the Council has not given a single reason to underpin the existence of a serious obstacle to the decision-making process. The general argument that the participants in the discussions must be able to count on confidentiality falls short, if only because the question of whether the obstacle to the decision-making process can be described as serious cannot be seen as separate from the question of whether a public interest calls for transparency and to what extent. In this regard, the fact that the decisions of the Code of Conduct Group are 'soft law' (which will or may also culminate in 'hard law' in relation to a number of issues) cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, the Code of Conduct Group's area of activity - the prevention of harmful tax competition between EU Member States - is a topic that has for some time occupied a prominent place in public debate. On this subject I believe I need merely to refer to the so-called LuxLeaks scandal and the brouhaha surrounding the tax rulings concerning Starbucks and Amazon, to name but two.

I would be grateful if you could send me confirmation that this confirmatory application has been registered.

(Complimentary close)

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