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From:	Ms Emily O'Reilly, European Ombudsman
date of receipt:	15 March 2024
To:	Ms Thérèse BLANCHET, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union
Subject:	Sponsorship of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union

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Delegations will find in the Annex a copy of a letter dated 15 March 2024 and addressed by the European Ombudsman to Ms. Thérèse Blanchet, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union, on the sponsorship of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Personal data have been redacted.

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Ms Thérèse Blanchet  
Secretary-General  
Council of the European Union

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Strasbourg, 15/03/2024

SI reference number: SI/3/2024/MIG

**Subject:** Sponsorship of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Dear Ms Blanchet,

I am writing to you to follow-up on a previous inquiry<sup>1</sup>.

Specifically, in 2019, my Office dealt with a complaint about the use of sponsorship by the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. In this context, I recommended that the Council should provide guidance to Member States on the issue, to mitigate the reputational risks to the EU. When the Council promised to consider this step, I closed my inquiry.

In June 2021, the Council issued "*Guidance for Presidency best practice on the use of sponsorship*".<sup>2</sup> In this guidance, the Council acknowledges that it is for the Member States to decide whether they want to use corporate sponsorship, given that they are responsible for the costs not covered by the Council's budget. Where Member States decide to use such sponsorship, the guidance states that they should "*carefully consider the possible impact of the choice of sponsors on the reputation of the Council or the EU.*" Those Member States should also "*put in place all measures necessary to avoid any conflict of interests and possible reputational risks for the Council or the EU arising out of the sponsorship.*"

Since the Council issued its guidance, the use of sponsorship by the Council Presidency has continued. It appears that the transparency around the identity of the sponsors involved and the nature of their support is still inadequate. For example, sponsors were sometimes not listed on the respective Presidency website. Where sponsors were listed, it remained unclear in some cases what their specific contributions were and what the sponsors gained in return. Also, whilst the use of the Council logo is prohibited

<sup>1</sup> Sponsorship of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union (case 1039/2019/MIG): <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/case/en/54953>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10325-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

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under the guidance issued by the Council, sponsors were still permitted to use the respective *Presidency* logo.

The use of sponsorship continues to give rise to considerable public disquiet. The European Parliament, in particular, remains concerned about the influence that sponsors might (expect to) have on EU policy- and law-making.<sup>3</sup> The use of sponsorship thus continues to carry a reputational risk for the Council and for the EU as a whole. This risk is even greater when, during a specific Presidency, there are deliberations on EU policy or legislation that could affect a sponsor's private interests.

I would therefore welcome an update from the Council on its experience with the guidance it adopted and would be grateful if representatives of the Council could meet with my staff to provide relevant information. Specifically, I would be interested in understanding whether and, if so, how the Council (i) raises awareness among Member States about its guidance, (ii) supports Member States in the run-up to and during the time they are holding the Presidency and (iii) monitors the application of its guidance. For example, it is not clear whether the Council assesses the adoption and adequacy of mitigation measures to address conflicts of interest and/or any reputational risk identified.

I would be grateful if your office could contact [REDACTED] (+32 [REDACTED] / [REDACTED]@ombudsman.europa.eu) to agree the arrangements for the meeting, preferably to take place before the end of April 2024. Please note that I have not opened an inquiry into the matter, but am seeking clarifications on the points mentioned above. My staff will share a list of detailed questions ahead of the meeting.

Yours sincerely,



Emily O'Reilly  
European Ombudsman

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, documentation on a workshop organised by the European Parliament in June 2023. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/757730/POL\\_STU\(2023\)757730\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/757730/POL_STU(2023)757730_EN.pdf).