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‘Corruption destroys trust in democratic processes and ultimately in democracy itself’

A decade ago, the Strässer Report exposed a scandal in the Council of Europe. Frank Schwabe on the dangers of corruption and how to fight it

Following the corruption-driven rejection of the Strässer report on political prisoners in Azerbaijan, you have made a name for yourself, among other things, with your efforts to shed light on the subject of Azerbaijan and corruption. Unfortunately, corruption continues to be a problem in Europe. The 'Qatargate' scandal in the European Parliament, which broke in December, is evidence of this. Did the scandal surprise you?

> Sadly, no. On the one hand, I find the scandal extremely regrettable. On the other, I have no doubt that political corruption unfortunately is a reality. That’s why it’s also good that, because of this scandal, we are talking more about corruption, about uncovering it and combatting it. As a result, we can tighten the rules in the Council of Europe, the European Parliament but also in the Bundestag — it’s a wake-up call for all of us. Over the course of the corruption affair brought to light after the rejection of the Strässer report, the Council of Europe was able to exclude corrupt officials and improve a great many rules and regulations. There were also repercussions at the national level in Germany. We imposed sanctions on members of parliament and tightened the Bundestag’s transparency rules. That said, today we also know that, after the corruption scandal broke, in the majority of countries nothing happened at all. Most of the members of the Council of Europe who were removed from office or stepped down voluntarily continued to be involved in national politics just as they had before.

Let’s take a step back: What was the Strässer Report about and why is it so important, despite the fact that it came out ten years ago?

The Strässer Report was about the treatment of political prisoners in Azerbaijan. Christoph Strässer who was then a Social Democrat member of the German Bundestag and Deputy Head of the German delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), was tasked with investigating the allegations. However, we now know that Azerbaijan did everything within its powers to sabotage this report on political prisoners in the Parliamentary Assembly. And it succeeded—with a fairly clear majority at that.

The fact that such an important and accurate report was rejected is one thing. This was an unusual enough occurrence. But after the vote, we saw inexplicable scenes of celebration in the Parliamentary Assembly. Of course, within the Council of Europe, there will always be different opinions on certain issues. But celebrating the fact that a report on political prisoners in a member state was voted down — and this is an institution that deals with human rights — is something that disturbs me to this day.

Initially, it didn't even occur to me that a corruption scandal could be behind all this. Today, I wonder why there wasn't an immediate investigation after the report was rejected. It took many more years and more scandalous incidents for the truth to come out.

What do you think is the worst part about this corruption case?

The fact that a human rights institution of all things, something which usually enjoys high legitimacy, could be broken by corruption. This will destroy trust in democratic processes and ultimately in democracy itself. What is more, this case has had a devastating impact on the human rights situation in Azerbaijan itself, as more people have been detained for political reasons.

Since exposing the corruption in connection with the rejected Strässer Report, what has changed for the better?

The repercussions have even been felt in the German Bundestag. Since then, new, significantly improved transparency rules have been introduced. Following the scandal, the Council of Europe, too, introduced a whole host of changes. The new rules are not enough in either of these cases — but at least they exist.

You have pointed out on numerous occasions that, even today, there are still former members of the Bundestag in the Council of Europe facing ongoing corruption allegations for whom there have been no consequences so far. What can the European Parliament, which is now dealing with the Qatargate scandal, learn from the Council of Europe in the hope of doing things differently?

There were definitely consequences in the German Bundestag, especially in two high-profile cases. One against CDU member of parliament Karin Strenz, who has since tragically passed away. And the other case was Axel Fischer, who the CDU decided not to renominate as a candidate for the Bundestag. Others have resigned from the German delegation to the Council of Europe. What there have not been, however, is legal consequences. The investigations being conducted by the public prosecutor's office in Munich are still ongoing.

What the European Parliament is now doing much better is the extensive legal proceedings against those accused in the Qatargate scandal. This is something that has been observed for several months and, ultimately, it seems that it will result in an indictment. Members of the European Parliament can be legally prosecuted as they fall under the jurisdiction of the Belgian justice system. The same does not apply to members of the Parliamentary Assembly, however, because when we travel to the seat of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, we are granted immunity. And it's in this ping-pong game of legal responsibility, or lack thereof, that corruption thrives.

We are still on a learning curve here. If we set up international institutions in such a way that neither the member's country of origin is responsible nor is the country in which the international institution is based, then there is a complete lack of accountability and thus also impunity. And this is exactly the problem the Council of Europe faces. In the European Parliament, things are arranged differently. We need to consider whether ultimately there should be different laws on the immunity of national members of parliament.

When the Qatargate scandal in the European Parliament broke, in light of the fact that the EU itself had withheld funds from Hungary due to democratic deficits, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán called for the European Parliament to be abolished…

This clearly shows how autocrats think. The EU must resolutely take action against Orbán and at the same time do everything to keep its own institutions squeaky clean. It would be absurd if we were to weaken the European Parliament, which despite all its problems is an important pillar of human rights. On the contrary, in fact, we must strengthen our anticorruption policy to make democratic institutions more effective.

Is it even possible to cooperate with countries like Azerbaijan, Qatar and Morocco, who actively engage in corruption, or what has been dubbed 'caviar diplomacy', and what actions must be taken in the context of this cooperation?

If we decided we couldn't work with countries that had corruption, there wouldn't be many left. That said, we must be rigorous in our approach and tell them that if they want to remain a member of these organisations, they need to be open to permanent scrutiny when it comes to meeting the membership criteria. And we will pay close attention. The corrupt countries will be monitored especially closely.

The media play a key role here, as politics and justice are apparently not capable of doing enough to prevent corruption. Only once the mass media picks up the topic does it suddenly get the necessary attention. Of course, there is always the risk of the issue being scandalised and exaggerated. But we have to accept that.

Bjørn Berge, the Council of Europe's Deputy Secretary referred to the corruption scandal in the European Parliament as a 'wake-up call'. Do you think the scandal really does have that kind of potential for European countries and institutions?

The Strässer Report really was a wake-up moment for the Council of Europe as an institution. The scandal also reminded Berlin that the Council of Europe existed, how important it is and that there are countries that go to great lengths to corrupt it — precisely because of its importance.

Corruption happens and that will always be the case. This is why we need an anticorruption culture, unambiguous criminal law arrangements and crystal-clear transparency rules. This includes educating members of parliament, who should regularly attend anti-corruption training and get to grips with the situation.

This interview was conducted by Valentina Berndt.



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