

E.U. Roiled by Corruption Inquiry Linked to Qatar

The bloc's parliament and its executive body are scrambling to manage the fallout as the Belgian authorities continue raids linked to suspected illegal lobbying.



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BRUSSELS — As the Belgian authorities broadened their investigation into allegations that European Parliament lawmakers and others may have taken bribes from Qatar, the assembly's president warned on Monday that illegal lobbying posed a major threat to the institution.

"European democracy is under attack," the president, Roberta Metsola, said in an emotional speech to fellow lawmakers.

Days after raiding residences and official offices and seizing evidence that included hundreds of thousands of euros in cash, the Belgian police on Monday launched new searches at European Parliament offices.

The searches were taking place as Ms. Metsola addressed European lawmakers in the French city of Strasbourg, the second headquarters of the Parliament.

Officials in Qatar have denied any wrongdoing.

Ms. Metsola said that the European Parliament was launching its own, internal inquiry and that it would continue assisting the authorities with their investigation.

The purpose of the new searches in Brussels, the federal prosecutor's office said in a statement, was to seize information harvested from the devices of 10 members of the Parliament's staff. On Sunday, there were also several raids conducted by the police in Italy. "A total of 20 searches have been carried out since the beginning of the operations, including 19 in private homes and the one in the offices of the European Parliament," the prosecutor said in the statement.

The Belgian authorities said they had secured computers from 10 parliamentary staffers. Since Friday, the prosecutor's office said, they have recovered one bag with 600,000 euros (\$632,000) in cash in the possession of one suspect, 150,000 euros in cash in the home of a European Parliament staffer and "several hundred thousand euros in a suitcase in a Brussels hotel room."



A European Parliament vice president, Eva Kaili of Greece, with her partner, Francesco Giorgi. Both have been charged. Eurokinissi//Agence France-Presse, via Getty Images

Since the raids were launched on Friday, after four months of investigation, six people have been taken in for questioning. Four have been charged with corruption, money laundering and participation in a criminal organization, among them a high-profile European lawmaker from Greece, Eva Kaili. Two more people were arrested in Italy in connection with the same case, the Belgian prosecutor's office said.

A former member of Parliament, Pier Antonio Panzeri, was also charged, as was Ms. Kaili's life partner, Francesco Giorgi, a close associate of Mr. Panzeri's who works as an aide to a sitting member of Parliament.

The defendants face up to 15 years in prison for the crimes they are accused of, Belgian legal experts said.

The Belgian prosecutor did not identify lawyers for the defendants, and their offices and family members did not respond to multiple requests since Friday for comment.

Ms. Kaili's assets, as well as those of her father and sister, in her native Greece have been frozen. Her father, Alexandros, was among those detained by the Belgian authorities in Brussels on Friday, but her lawyer, Michalis Dimitrakopoulos, said he had been released without charge.

The case has sent shock waves through the bloc's seat in Brussels, a place more associated with policy statements and bureaucrats than police raids and bags of cash.

The European Parliament called for a vote on Tuesday to strip Ms. Kaili of her title as vice president. It also suspended a planned vote on legislation that would have paved the way for Qataris to receive highly coveted visas upon arrival in the European Union. Those visas are said to have been a main focus of the lobbying campaign and alleged bribery.

Qataris need to apply for a visa before visiting the European Union and face a relatively lengthy process. The proposed new visa rules would enable them to get a visa upon arrival in an E.U. country, permitting them to stay for up to three months — a significant easing of the rules on visitors from the small Gulf state.

Despite Qatar's rejection of the claims against it, the drama in Brussels is reverberating globally. The scandal may prove especially troubling for the Qatari government at a moment when its officials might prefer to be celebrating a crowning achievement: hosting the World Cup. The gas-rich country has been working toward the event, which concludes on Sunday, for more than a decade.



Pier Antonio Panzeri, a former member of Parliament, was also charged. Stephanie Lecocq/EPA, via Shutterstock

Despite a barrage of critical coverage from Western media, and protests from human rights groups focusing on the authoritarian state's exploitation of migrant workers and its criminalization of homosexuality, Qatari officials say it has been worth it. The event has brought fans from around the world to the nation of three million people.

Government officials hoped the exposure would not only raise their country's international profile but also help battle stereotypes about Qataris, and more broadly Arabs and Muslims. Yet depending on how the E.U. case unfolds, it could reinforce the perception of critics in Europe and North America that Qatar has bought its space on the world stage.

Last month, Ms. Kaili spoke fawningly about Qatar's labor reforms ahead of the World Cup launch; she also visited Doha in November and praised the nation's preparations for the sporting event.

"The World Cup in Qatar is proof, actually, of how sports diplomacy can achieve a historical transformation of a country with reforms that inspired the Arab world," Ms. Kaili said during a debate in Parliament. "Still, some here are calling to discriminate [against] them. They bully them, and they accuse everyone that talks to them or engages of corruption."

The European Parliament is the least powerful of the three key E.U. institutions, but as the Qatar case shows, its members can be active and visible.

On Monday, a more powerful E.U. institution, the European Commission, was in an awkward spot. The commission has adopted an enthusiastic public stance toward Qatar as it scours the earth to secure energy sources to replace the Russian oil and gas lost since Russia invaded Ukraine.

Margaritis Schinas, the commission's vice president, for example, recently visited Qatar and has been praising the country's reforms on social media. "Qatar, the first Arab and the smallest country ever to host the Cup, delivered reforms & merits a global success," he wrote on Twitter last month.

Qatar has been identified as a key source of liquefied natural gas, which the E.U. needs to get through this and future winters'



Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission. Virginia Mayo/Associated Press

Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, deflected questions about the investigation, but noted that "we work with Qatar on regional issues such as peace and stability in Afghanistan and the Middle East, and on bilateral issues, such as diversification away from Russian fossil fuels."

Asked whether the Belgian police had reached out to the commission, Ms. von der Leyen deferred to her staff; a spokesman for the institution later said it was up to the Belgian authorities to say whether they were investigating it.

Ms. von der Leyen vowed to scrutinize records of Commission members' meetings and travels. But ultimately, she said, "as long as there is no new information, we are at the status quo."

Ms. Metsola, the European lawmaker who lamented the scandal on Monday, had a different take.

"We would rather be cold than bought," she said.

Sarah Hurtes and Koba Ryckewaert contributed reporting from Brussels, Vivian Nereim from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Niki Kitsantonis from Athens.