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EU Qatar Corruption



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Corrupting the European Parliament: Qatar's Sports Diplomacy

How utterly fitting that it should happen at this time. The Qatar FIFA World Cup is coming to a close, a tournament nakedly bought by a state keen to be a standard bearer, not merely of the Arab world, but the world of shameless sportswashing. Despite being criticised for its human rights record, its laws against sexual minorities and its shabby treatment of migrant labourers, Doha will be delighted at yet another tournament passing without effectual criticism.

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The tournament has certainly seen a number of converts to Qatar's increasingly large tent of the uncritical. The French President Emmanuel Macron, for one, is telling us that "sport shouldn't be politicised."

In Europe, however, we see the tentacles of Qatar's footballing gambit and the range of its influence. The European Parliament has come under a thick cloud of suspicion for receiving bribes and incentives for allegedly fostering a positive image of the Gulf state. Nothing concentrates the undecided mind quite like a large wad of cash.

The most notable scalp of an ongoing investigation into alleged illicit lobbying activities has been the European Parliament Vice-President Eva Kaili, whose December 9 arrest sent a chill through Strasbourg and Brussels. The next day, she was suspended from her vice-presidential role, and charged with corruption. Expulsions duly followed from the parliament's Socialists and Democrats Group, and the Greek Pasok party.

Kaili was one of four suspects charged after Belgian investigators found 1.5 million euros spread across two homes and a suitcase. The latter, located in a Brussels hotel room, is said to have had 750,000 euros; cash worth 600,000 euros and 150,000 euros were found at the home of one suspect and at the flat of an MEP, respectively. The now former vice-president's innocence has been declared through her lawyer, who claimed to have "no idea if any money was found or how much was found" at his client's flat.

The other suspects, all Italian nationals, include Kaili's partner and parliamentary assistant, Francesco Giorgi; former MEP Pier Antonio Panzeri, who heads the human rights group Fight Impunity; and Niccolò Figa-Talamanca, who steers the lobby group No Peace Without Justice.

Doha has certainly done much to convince European counterparts that criticisms are being addressed. In September 2021, an MEP delegation met Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz Al Thani, and found much merit to claimed reforms. Marc Tarabella, vice-chair of the delegation for relations with the Arab Peninsula and chair of the Sport intergroup in the European parliament, claimed that Qatar valued "the EU inputs" and had demonstrated "that the country is willing to work together to achieve the outcome for workers."

With the football tournament in full swing, Tarabella was also effusive in praising Qatar for becoming "a good example to follow for the other countries in the neighbourhood." Last month, Kaili was also happy to concur in a speech to fellow parliamentarians that had a pungent smell of connivance. "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.”

In self-praise, Kaili claimed that she had been “alone” in stating that Qatar was “a frontrunner in labour rights, abolishing kafala and [introducing a] minimum wage.” In reading from the pro-Doha script, she reproached critics for bullying and accusing all who talk to Qatari officials as engaging in corruption. “We can promote our values, but we do not have the moral right for lectures to get cheap media attention.”

Tarabella’s involvement was sufficient to pique the interest of Belgian police, who raided the home of the socialist Belgian MEP on December 10, seizing computer equipment along the way. “I have absolutely nothing to hide and I will answer all the questions of the investigators, that goes without saying, if that can help them shed light on this affair,” he stated. “The justice system is going through its process of information gathering and investigating, which I find completely appropriate.”

The rippling effects of Qatar’s purchasing influence are also being felt in other European states. The French financial prosecutor’s office is mulling over corruption charges relating to the award of the tournament to Qatar and any role played by French officials in that venture. Other political figures, such as National Assembly member Alexis Corbière, have openly claimed that “many lobbyists” had approached him to alter his views of the World Cup as a “social, ecological and democratic aberration.”

Indignation and shock are never good indicators of sincerity and accuracy. Parliamentary leader Roberta Metsola is sounding like a witchfinder in search of scapegoats rather than a doctor on the hunt for a diagnosis. “European democracy is under attack and our free and democratic societies are under attack.”

How this is so is not made clear, though it is evident about the reach of Qatar’s sports washing prowess. Metsola also promises that, “There will be no impunity, there will be no sweeping under the carpet.” That will surely depend on the scale of what is found – and the size of the carpet able to accommodate the findings.

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