



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Lisette Marroquín-Velásquez,
University of Costa Rica, Costa Rica

REVIEWED BY

Javier Sierra-Sánchez,
Complutense University of Madrid, Spain
Rodolfo De Camargo Lima,
Universidad San Sebastián, Chile
Graciela Padilla-Castillo,
Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

*CORRESPONDENCE

María Jesús Fernández-Torres
✉ mariajesusfernandez@uma.es
Rocío Chamizo-Sánchez
✉ rcs@uma.es

RECEIVED 21 November 2024

ACCEPTED 18 February 2025

PUBLISHED 12 March 2025

CITATION

Fernández-Torres MJ and
Chamizo-Sánchez R (2025) Qatargate and
lobbying crisis in the European Union. Media
analysis and regulatory challenges for
institutional transparency.
Front. Polit. Sci. 7:1532117.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1532117

COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Fernández-Torres and
Chamizo-Sánchez. This is an open-access
article distributed under the terms of the
[Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC
BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or reproduction in
other forums is permitted, provided the
original author(s) and the copyright owner(s)
are credited and that the original publication
in this journal is cited, in accordance with
accepted academic practice. No use,
distribution or reproduction is permitted
which does not comply with these terms.

Qatargate and lobbying crisis in the European Union. Media analysis and regulatory challenges for institutional transparency

María Jesús Fernández-Torres and Rocío Chamizo-Sánchez*

Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising, Faculty of Communication Sciences,
University of Malaga, Malaga, Spain

The lobby seeks to influence public policy decisions, requiring this influence to remain free of irregular practices to be legitimate. This research is contextualized in one of the most important sporting events of 2022, the Qatar Soccer World Cup, organized by FIFA and taking place from 20 November to 18 December 2022. The case study focuses on the Qatargate scandal, a plot investigated by the Belgian police for alleged bribes from Qatar and other countries to MEPs and senior civil servants to influence political decisions and to downplay human rights abuses in the World Cup host country. Qatargate was the tip of the iceberg for many of those who study decision-making in Europe, causing an unprecedented commotion within the European Union and exposing the vulnerabilities of the lobbying sector and the need for a solvent regulatory framework that would guarantee transparency and the legitimacy of lobbying as a necessary part of democratic processes, avoiding and punishing all corrupt practices. The objective of this research focuses on analyzing the informative treatment of the Qatargate case in the Spanish press, identifying the media framing given to this corruption case and how the selected media report on said scandal. At the same time, it is also intended to know if these frameworks address the role that certain institutions have in promoting transparency in the European Union and if sufficient regulatory measures are required to provide standardized systems that allow the promotion of transparency and good practice in the lobbying sector.

KEYWORDS

Qatar, sport, lobbies, political communication, European Union, foreign policy

1 Introduction

Corruption and undue influence of certain private actors in public institutions has been a growing concern within the European Union. In recent years, attention has focused on emblematic and controversial cases such as the one at hand, known as “Qatargate”. This term refers to the corruption scandal that shook the European Parliament, revealing a network of bribes linked to Qatar (and later Morocco) to influence political, economic, and legislative decisions in the Eurochamber and involved several European officials and their alleged relationship with the government of Qatar. This case represents a clear example of the use of improper mechanisms to exert pressure and influence on the organs of power of the European Union, where elected representatives accepted bribes in exchange for

downplaying the human rights violations taking place in Qatar, as well as contributing to the improvement of the image of the Arab country.

The present study aims to analyze the media coverage that the Qatargate case received in the Spanish press and to evaluate how this scandal has been represented in relation to transparency policies and lobbying regulation in the European Union. Through a literature review and content analysis of the main news items addressing this topic, we aim to identify the predominant narrative frames, as well as the treatment of the scandal that shook the political activity of the European Union.

Ultimately, the case at hand requires a review of the related literature that allows understanding the role of pressure groups today and the different reflections and theories on this issue. One of the aspects to highlight from this bibliographic review is the effort to properly define and delimit terms that are often used synonymously given the subtle line that differentiates them, such as: lobby, pressure group, and interest group. The growing citizen demand for greater participation in public policies and greater transparency in decision-making by competent bodies requires a thorough exercise by academics to delimit and differentiate the various influential actors over political decision-makers.

Lobbying is a fundamental mechanism in modern democratic systems as it allows different actors to influence the public decision-making process. However, its regulation within the European Union presents significant deficiencies, which have facilitated the emergence of scandals such as Qatargate.

In a strict sense, as [Transparencia Internacional España \(2022\)](#) points out, the term “lobby” refers to a natural or legal person who professionally advocates for the interests of third parties. Accordingly, [Xifra \(1998\)](#) identifies lobbies from this intermediation role and defines them as “agencies, communication offices, or law firms, professionally dedicated to lobbying activities on behalf of an interest or pressure group that hires them” (p. 26).

It is essential to differentiate lobbying from pressure groups and interest groups. While interest groups represent specific sectors of society and seek to influence policies affecting their interests, pressure groups use more active strategies, including social mobilization campaigns and direct pressure on legislators. Lobbying, in contrast, refers to the professionalized intermediation between interest groups and decision-makers, a practice that can be regulated within a framework of transparency and ethics ([Greenwood, 2018](#)).

Finer [cited in [Celis \(1963\)](#)] differentiates the “pressure group” from the lobby precisely in the exercise of pressure that the former performs. For the author, the lobby is characterized by “presenting a petition to the responsible authority without attempting to impose sanctions or threaten them in case the petition is rejected” (p. 45). In this sense, the lobby acts, through communication, as a mediator in defense of the interests of companies, business groups, or other social sectors, to influence political decisions. In this task, lobbying is defined from the perspective of political public relations ([Martínez, 1998](#)).

Regarding the concept of “interest group”, it is understood as one that represents the interests of different individuals and seeks to mobilize members to influence public policy [Hayes, cited in [Ramos \(1997\)](#), p. 254]. Linares [cited by [Castillo and Almansa \(2014\)](#)

notes that while all pressure groups are interest groups, not all interest groups are pressure groups:

Interest groups are individual groupings formed around common particular interests, whose essential purpose of the association is to defend those interests; when these groups exert pressure in defense of particular interests over the State, political parties, public opinion, or their own members, they become pressure groups.

While there are differences in the mechanisms employed and the scope of their actions, the common element among the three groups of actors (lobbies, pressure groups, and interest groups) is the exercise of influence over public policies. In this sense, the [Asociación de Profesionales de las Relaciones Públicas \(2024\)](#), henceforth APRI, understands lobbying as an activity whose purpose is “to improve political decisions through the realistic perceptions of companies, associations, or citizen groups”.

Interest groups play an important and legitimate role in the democratic process. The Constitution promotes the right of citizens to participate in political, economic, cultural, and social life in an equal manner and urges public authorities to ensure this. It is a fundamental right of civil society to have access, through their representatives, to Institutions to convey their demands in an organized manner, generate debates around them, and influence legislative and executive decision-making in their favor.

[Castillo et al. \(2017, p. 786\)](#), drawing on the contributions of Easton, refer to interest groups as “structural regulators of demand volume”, meaning instruments to channel demands to the public administration. In this regard, they distinguish two types of regulations: structural regulation, which turns a need into a demand, and cultural regulation, which values that need that should socially be accepted as a demand.

The lack of specific lobbying regulation that adequately governs this activity is one of the most noted aspects by various sources of analysis on this matter ([Álvarez and De Montalvo, 2014](#); [Navarro and Andrés, 2016](#); [Revuelta and Villoria, 2016](#); and [Arceo and Álvarez, 2023](#)). While it is true that since 2010 the number of related laws has increased considerably, most have taken place reactively and in response, in many cases, to public scandals ([Villoria and Fernández-Rúa, 2017](#)). A review of existing European regulations revealed a weak and insufficient scenario by the end of 2015, in which almost all European Union member countries failed ([Villoria and Revuelta, 2015](#); see [Figure 1](#)).

In the current context, it is the Anglo-Saxon countries that exhibit more advanced and comprehensive regulation, with the United States and Canada standing out as pioneers, and the United Kingdom with a later regulation¹. This regulatory content encompasses not only lobbying the Legislative Branch, as is the case with most existing laws, but also lobbying the Executive Branch, thus becoming international regulatory frameworks of reference.

In the case of Spain, in 2022, the Council of Ministers approved the *Ley de Transparencia y de Integridad en las Actividades de los Grupos de Interés*, in response to the European Council’s requirements for greater transparency within the framework of

¹ On January 30, 2014, the *Ley de Transparencia del Cabildo, Campañas No partidistas y Unión Comercial* was approved.

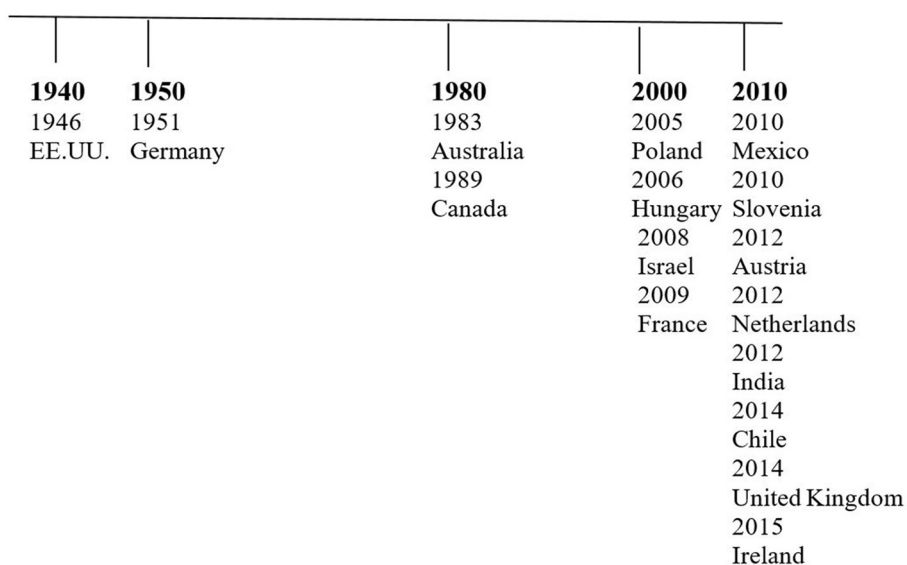


FIGURE 1
Regulatory developments in OECD countries. Source: Own elaboration based on Villoria and Fernández-Rúa (2017).

influences in the public policy decision-making process. Regions such as Catalonia, Asturias, Autonomous Community of Valencia, Aragon, Castilla La Mancha, Navarre, and the Autonomous Community of Madrid already have regulations in this area, although most of them cover lobbying activities only partially, except for Catalonia and the Autonomous Community of Valencia, which have more specific legal frameworks (Blanco, 2024)².

Pressure groups in the European Union, considering their volume and the activities developed given the influence they can exert in the decision-making processes within the three institutions (Parliament, Commission, and European Council), are gaining increasing importance. In 2011, the European Commission and Parliament³ launched the Transparency Register for interest

groups to regulate this activity. This serves as a control tool for public access and information for interested citizens, being a key tool for the Union to promote transparent and ethical interest representation (Consejo de Administración del Registro de Transparencia, 2023). Essentially, it is a database through which we can know what interests are represented, who represents them, on whose behalf, which legislative files they target, and the resources allocated to related activities. As of December 31, 2023, the number of registered entities is 12,496, with Spain ranking fifth in the number of registered lobbies (Consejo de Administración del Registro de Transparencia, 2023). Registration in the register allows long-term access to the Parliament, participation as speakers in public hearings, subscription to legislative activity notifications, meetings with Commission members, cabinets and CEOs, and being named part of an expert group (Asociación de Profesionales de las Relaciones Públicas, 2024).

The regulation of interest groups becomes increasingly necessary considering the possibilities offered by new technologies in creating discourse and generating debate, as well as mobilizing masses through pre-determined campaigns on social media in favor of certain interests, often using false information. Undoubtedly, a specific regulatory framework will contribute to reducing bad practices and preventing influence peddling. Few European Union countries have any regulations in this regard, and they present significant deficiencies in their application, leaving room for the use of various mechanisms to influence public policies (OECD, 2021).

Although the Qatargate case has its origins in January 2013, when the French magazine France Football published an extensive investigative report on the irregularities committed by the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in awarding Qatar's candidacy for hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup in 2010, it was not until December 2022 that the media disseminated the corruption scandal, which ultimately cost Eva

2 Catalonia: Ley 19/2014, de 29 de diciembre, de transparencia, acceso a la información pública y buen gobierno and the Decreto-ley 1/2017, de 14 de febrero, por el que se crea y se regula el Registro de grupos de interés de Cataluña.

Asturias: Ley 8/2018, de 14 de septiembre, de Transparencia, Buen Gobierno y Grupos de Interés.

Valencia: Ley 25/2018, de 10 de diciembre, reguladora de la actividad de los grupos de interés de la Comunitat Valenciana.

Aragon: Ley 5/2017, de 1 de junio, de Integridad y Ética Públicas.

Castilla La Mancha: Ley 4/2016, de 15 de diciembre, de Transparencia y Buen Gobierno de Castilla-La Mancha.

Navarre: Ley Foral 5/2018, de 17 de mayo, de Transparencia, acceso a la información pública y buen gobierno.

Autonomous Community of Madrid: Ley 10/2019, de 10 de abril, de Transparencia y de Participación de la Comunidad de Madrid.

3 Through the Interinstitutional Agreement of May 20, 2021, the Transparency Register is jointly managed by the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, and the European Commission.

Kaili, the then Vice-President of the European Parliament, her position.

In the Persian Gulf, countries have been striving for decades to secure major sporting events as a positioning strategy (Moral, 2018). In this regard, Qatar, with the awarding of the 2022 FIFA World Cup as the host country, has sought to enhance its international recognition as a state. From a mercantilist perspective, it is not surprising to understand football as a powerful tool of soft power, where governments and multinational corporations invest vast sums of money to bolster their international public image (Esteban, 2017).

Ron (2018, p. 32) establishes a direct relationship between sports and politics from three perspectives:

- **National identity.** Sporting achievements elevate the country's international prestige and reinforce citizens' sense of belonging. They promote the connection of national values and policies, demonstrating the potency of a political ideology.
- **Diplomatic sense.** Organizing a mega-event confers international recognition and opens the door to negotiations in foreign policy.
- **Capacity for change or development.** Securing the hosting of globally projected sporting events presents the nation in question as a space with the ability to manage, organize, demonstrate economic solvency, and validate ideological principles, among other things.

In this relationship between politics and sports, Fruh et al. (2023) refer to the term sportswashing as the strategy of organizations and countries with morally questionable practices that, through high-profile sporting events, attempt to divert attention and improve their reputation.

The dubious awarding in 2010 of the 2022 FIFA World Cup to a country that did not meet the conditions for hosting it, given its unsuitable hot climate for an event in June as established by the sports calendar; that lacked adequate infrastructure; and whose status as an Islamic country posed significant challenges for organizing the World Cup; eventually uncovered a scheme of bribes and malpractice by the Qatari government toward European Union political decision-makers, which was widely reported by national and international media.

The main purpose of this study is to examine the media coverage received by the Qatargate case, which shook the credibility of European politics, identifying the elements that the press paid special attention to and describing the corruption plot that unfolded. In this regard, only one related study has been identified: the research conducted by Quintana (2023), which identifies the media framing that the news received in European media, where the Qatargate case is presented by European institutions as an anomalous case within the EU territory, highlighting the prominence of the accused in the media narrative. Studies related to this scandal are scarce. The scientific literature mainly focuses on reviewing existing regulations and procedures within the European Union framework for combating corruption, as well as the legal measures adopted following the December 22 scandal (Carta, 2023; Parisi and Rinoldi, 2023; Costa, 2024). These studies consistently show a lack of rigor in applying the related regulations and the malfunctioning of accountability mechanisms to citizens. They also

conclude by suggesting the creation of an independent European body to oversee ethical issues and sanction behaviors that could harm the image and credibility of the European Union.

Another related study shows the negative impact that this type of scandal generates in public opinion. Hegewald and Schraff (2024) reveal in their conclusions that the rejection expressed by the public could lead to political disengagement of the electorate, resulting in voter demobilization. They also conclude that this situation should prompt the European Parliament toward greater transparency in its internal management.

The present research aims to analyze the media coverage of the Qatargate case in the Spanish press and its relationship with the debate on institutional transparency and lobbying regulation in the European Union. To this end, the following specific objectives are established:

1. Examine the coverage of Qatargate in Spanish digital media, identifying the predominant journalistic approaches, the actors involved, and the main narrative frames used in representing the scandal.
2. Analyze how the press presented the nature of the scandal and its political and institutional implications in the European Union, paying special attention to the mechanisms of corruption, the relationship with lobbying, and the response of European institutions.
3. Identify the regulatory and political responses to the Qatargate case and assess the importance of ethics and integrity in European institutions.

2 Methodology

To carry out this research, the methodology employed was based on two fundamental lines: a systematic literature review and a content analysis applied to a sample of news articles about the Qatargate case.

Firstly, a systematic review of the scientific literature was conducted at both national and international levels, using the study's keywords: pressure group, interest group, lobbying, Qatargate, FIFA, European Parliament, and European Union. To this end, international academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar) were consulted, employing search strategies with individual keywords and combinations of terms. This review aimed to contextualize the Qatargate case within the academic debate on corruption and lobbying regulation in the European Union, allowing for the identification of previous conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches used in similar studies.

The other technique focused on content analysis, which, as López-Aranguren (2015) points out, is based on analyzing social reality through the observation and analysis of documents. This second methodological axis of the study was applied to a sample of 99 news pieces extracted from Google News published in December 2022, the month when the Qatargate scandal was revealed by the media. The selection of such news was based on the following criteria:

- (a) **Temporality:** News published in December 2022 were included, coinciding with the outbreak of the scandal in the media, with emphasis on December 9, the date when the

TABLE 1 Table with coding variables.

Headline
Lead
Protagonist of the news
Nature of the scandal
Modus operandi
Countries involved
Objectives of the bribes
Types of bribes and methods
Legal consequences
Institutional implications
Political impact

Source: Own elaboration.

news was disclosed by the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* and the weekly *Knack*.

- (b) **Relevance:** Only news where the term “Qatargate” appeared in the headline or lead were considered, ensuring that the main focus of the news was the scandal.
- (c) **Source:** Priority was given to digital media with national and international reach and coverage in Spanish.

Content analysis is a systematic method for interpreting the meaning of texts through a coding process (Krippendorff, 2013). For this study, a mixed coding approach was undertaken: deductive, by using categories previously identified in the literature on topics such as corruption and lobbying, and inductive, by incorporating new emerging categories after an initial exploratory analysis of the news pieces. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, a random double coding of 15% of the news was performed, obtaining an intercoder agreement index of 85%, indicating a high level of consistency in data categorization.

For the content analysis, a coding matrix (Table 1) was designed with specific variables selected based on previous studies on media analysis of corruption and lobbying in the EU (Villoria and Fernández-Rúa, 2017; Revuelta and Villoria, 2016) and complemented with emerging categories identified in an initial reading of the sample.

The categories of analysis included in the coding matrix were: Headline and lead, to identify the initial journalistic approach; protagonist of the news, to recognize key actors in the corruption plot; nature of the scandal, to determine how the media characterized Qatargate; modus operandi, with the objective of identifying the mechanisms used in the bribery network; countries involved, to analyze the role of Qatar, Morocco, and other regions involved in the scandal; objectives of the bribes, to examine the political and economic interests behind the corruption; types of bribes and methods, to detail the corrupt practices exposed in the media; legal consequences, to evaluate the judicial impact of the scandal; institutional implications, to analyze the European Union’s responses and reform proposals, as well as political impact, to assess the scandal’s effect on public trust and political debate.

3 Results

This section presents the main findings obtained from the analysis of the 99 news articles selected. The research focused on the media treatment of the Qatargate case, evaluating how the Spanish press represented this corruption scandal in the European Parliament. The analyzed media approached the scandal from various perspectives, ranging from political analysis to geopolitical dimensions. In this regard, it is important to highlight that no significant difference was found in the treatment of the scandal depending on the media outlet, with most of them focusing on the same points, which coincide with the coding variables considered in the methodology. To provide a structured analysis, the results are presented according to the coding variables previously established in the methodology.

3.1 Main players and figures involved

Upon detailed analysis of the informative pieces, it is noteworthy that **Eva Kaili**, a Greek Member of the European Parliament from the socialist party and then Vice President of the European Parliament, emerges as the central figure in the corruption plot. Kaili was arrested and removed from her position after being accused of corruption and money laundering, as well as accepting bribes from Qatar. She was detained along with other individuals, including her partner Francesco Giorgi and her father, who were caught transporting cash. Kaili acknowledged the involvement of both her partner and her father in concealing money, although she denied her direct participation. Kaili admitted to the Belgian judge investigating the case (Michael Claise) that she instructed her father, **Alexandros Kailis**, to remove a large amount of cash from her residence.

Kaili’s partner and parliamentary advisor, **Francesco Giorgi**, admitted his involvement in the plot and his role in the bribery network, highlighting payments from Qatar and Morocco. Giorgi identified another implicated actor as the mastermind of the bribery scheme, the former Italian Member of the European Parliament **Pier Antonio Panzeri**, who operated through his NGO Fight Impunity. Panzeri, from whose residence the police seized 700,000 euros, acted in favor of Qatar and Morocco and had political and trade union connections. Panzeri’s wife, **Maria Colleoni**, and his daughter, **Silvia Panzeri**, were also arrested, accused of being aware of these dealings.

The network also implicates **Maria Spyraiki**, another Greek MEP, in a possible fraud related to the use of parliamentary allowances.

Another detainee was **Luca Visentini**, then Secretary General of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), who was dismissed from his position following the scandal and was previously Secretary General of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC).

Other minor figures mentioned in the analyzed informative pieces are the Belgian socialist MEP **Marc Tarabella** and high-profile figures such as the former European Commissioner **Dimitris Avramopoulos**.

3.2 Nature of the scandal and targets of the bribes

According to the analysis of the news, this corruption network began to take shape in 2018 and involved bribes to high-ranking officials of the European Parliament, primarily by Qatar, and to a lesser extent by Morocco and, subsequently, Mauritania. The objective of these bribes, according to investigations, was to influence political and legislative decisions within the Parliament. Consequently, decisions such as the elimination of visas for Qatari citizens and strategic agreements like the aviation agreement between Qatar and the EU were made. Additionally, Qatar sought to secure favorable decisions during the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Another goal of such bribes was to improve the international image of Qatar and, to a lesser extent, Morocco, as well as to defend the interests of these countries regarding human rights.

3.3 Main countries involved

Although various countries are mentioned in the news pieces, the scandal at hand centers on two involved countries, namely Qatar and Morocco.

Qatar stands out as the primary country implicated in the Qatargate scandal. The country attempted to influence European politics by bribing Members of the European Parliament to improve its international image and exert influence on EU political decisions, particularly, as previously mentioned, in the elimination of visas for citizens from Qatar and Kuwait. Additionally, the country sought to secure support on key issues such as human rights, energy, and its regional role. Thus, from the Arab country, payments and gifts were offered to European officials to promote Qatari interests, especially at times when the EU was reconsidering its relationship with Qatar in the context of the energy crisis and other political aspects. This linkage is closely related to events like the organization of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Morocco, on the other hand, is mentioned in the analyzed news pieces as another country involved in bribes, albeit less prominently than Qatar. Some Moroccan officials and lobbies attempted to influence the decisions of the European Parliament, seeking to promote the country's interests on issues such as migration and economic cooperation. The accusations against the country include attempts at bribery and pressure on some MEPs to garner greater support for Morocco on various political and economic issues.

Other countries appearing in the news pieces, with an indirect role in the scandal or less emphasis than Qatar and Morocco, include **Belgium** (as the seat of EU institutions), **Greece**, and **Italy** (as the countries of politicians and lobbies involved in the scheme) as well as **Mauritania** (pointed out by the Belgian press as another country involved in bribing Brussels officials to influence their policies).

3.4 Types of bribes and modus operandi

The analyzed news pieces reveal that the Qatargate scandal primarily comprises four types of bribes:

1. **Cash:** The extent of the scheme included more than 1.5 million euros, which were seized from the residences of the individuals involved. The modus operandi in this modality focused on suitcases and bags filled with money.
2. **Gifts and material benefits:** In addition to money, those involved received luxury trips, expensive gifts, and other material benefits such as real estate properties and vehicles.
3. **Instructions for concealment:** For example, Eva Kaili instructed her father to remove cash from her residence when the investigation was advancing, which allowed the police to intervene despite her parliamentary immunity.
4. **Lobbying and manipulation in decisions:** The implicated individuals allegedly voted to favor visa policies and agreements that benefited Qatar and Morocco. The scheme also exposed the role of NGOs and lobbying organizations in the European Parliament, particularly in the case of the NGO "Fight Impunity" led by Panzeri, which was used as a front for the bribes.

3.5 Institutional implications

The Qatargate scandal highlighted the lack of effective controls in the European Parliament regarding the interaction of MEPs with lobbies and foreign countries, as well as the urgency of implementing structural reforms to improve transparency and prevent similar cases from recurring. The EU pointed out the urgent need for reform that would include transparency in its relations with external pressure groups.

For its part, the European Parliament quickly dismissed Kaili on December 13, 2022, with the support of 625 MEPs, doubling the required minimum. Additionally, the scandal motivated initiatives to increase transparency. The European Commission proposed a law to MEPs to harmonize anti-corruption laws across the 27 member states, calling for "severe" penalties against bribery, illicit enrichment, embezzlement, influence peddling, and abuse of power.

The president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, promised profound reforms to improve transparency and control over the contacts of MEPs with external entities, as well as to review the activities of lobbies and NGOs. Metsola considered that Qatargate "has destroyed 20 years of trust in the European Parliament", and in January 2023, she presented 14 proposed measures aimed at "strengthening integrity, independence, and accountability". Ongoing agreements involving Qatar, such as visa liberalization and the aviation agreement, were suspended.

Additionally, the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, ordered a review of the transparency registers of meetings with third parties to prevent future cases.

3.6 Policy impact

According to the analysis of the news pieces, the scandal was devastating for the image of the European Parliament, severely affecting its reputation and casting doubt on its ability to

TABLE 2 Summary of main findings based on the variables analyzed.

Category	Main finding
Protagonists	Eva Kaili, as a central figure; Giorgi, Panzeri and Visentini, involved
Nature of the scandal	Bribes from Qatar and Morocco to influence the European Union
Countries involved	Qatar, Morocco, Belgium, Italy, Greece and Mauritania
Types of bribes	Cash, gifts, concealment, legislative manipulation
Institutional response	Kaili's dismissal and a total of 14 anti-corruption measures from the European Union
Political impact	Crisis of confidence in the European Union and political instrumentalization

Source: Own elaboration.

resist foreign influences and maintain its commitment to ethics and transparency.

Countries like Hungary used the Qatargate to delegitimize European criticism of their own rule of law, while the incident called into question the integrity of European institutions.

In summary, and to improve the clarity and accessibility of the findings, a summary table (Table 2) is presented, which shows that the media coverage of the Qatargate in the Spanish press emphasized corruption and its impact on the European Union, highlighting the need for institutional reforms. The journalistic narrative reinforced the perception of a crisis of integrity in the European Parliament, which generated a debate on the regulation of lobbying and transparency in political decision-making.

4 Discussion and conclusions

One of the largest corruption scandals in the history of the European Parliament, with legal, political, and relational implications between the European Union and countries like Qatar and Morocco, is represented by the Qatargate. This study demonstrates that the scandal not only exposed the undue influence of external actors on European institutions but also revealed structural deficiencies in lobbying regulations and the need to strengthen the European Union's transparency mechanisms.

One of the key findings of this study is that Qatargate is not an isolated case but a reflection of structural vulnerabilities within European institutions. As noted by Andersen and Eliassen (1991), Bernhagen (2014), and Baumgartner (2007), pressure groups can operate both from the private sector and from foreign governments, posing risks to the political integrity of the European Union. In this regard, *Transparencia Internacional España* (2022) has highlighted that the pressure exerted by Qatar in this case cannot be considered legitimate lobbying, but rather punishable corruption. The lack of unified lobbying regulation allows external actors to use financial and diplomatic influence methods to shape political decisions to their benefit. This problem is exacerbated by the diversity of national regulations and the absence of an effective supervisory mechanism at the community level.

This research also confirms the concerns reflected in previous reports by *Transparencia Internacional Spain* (2015) and studies

such as Villoria and Fernández-Rúa (2017) regarding the insufficiency of lobby registers and the lack of accountability of public decision-makers. In this sense, Pérez (2023) points out that, given lobbying is an activity with such a high risk of corruption, it is difficult to understand why it has not yet been subject to systematic and uniform regulation. The involvement of European parliamentarians in this corruption scheme reinforces the idea that, without a strict regulatory framework, institutions will continue to be vulnerable to such improper practices. In this case, it has been observed how political decision-makers accepted bribes and economic favors to benefit a foreign government, a situation that exposes the need for a thorough review of control and transparency mechanisms in European institutions, carrying out internal reforms of the Parliament as a key to restoring confidence in the institutions, as also stated in the conclusions of Carta (2023), Parisi and Rinoldi (2023), Costa (2024), and Hegewald and Schraff (2024).

Interest and pressure groups are necessary and respond to the fundamental right of citizens to participate in legislative and executive decision-making processes. However, influence practices like the one at hand discredit these groups and call into question the actions of power bodies, generating a broad debate about integrity and ethics in European politics.

Another debate generated by this scandal has focused on the relationship between sports and foreign policy. The importance and social impact of football, as noted by Castillo et al. (2016), involve the confluence of complex and diverse interests such as political, economic, social, and cultural implications. The Qatargate case has occupied significant newspaper headlines following the questioned awarding of the 2022 FIFA World Cup as the host of this major sporting event. Undoubtedly, improper influence mechanisms have extended from the relationship of Qatar's leaders with the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) to the European Parliament.

It is necessary to scrutinize more deeply how external countries attempt to exert influence on European Union politics by implementing internal control mechanisms. Additionally, policies and regulations must be applied to maintain an atmosphere of integrity and ethics in European politics. The European Commission's proposal to implement new transparency measures is a first step but remains insufficient without effective enforcement mechanisms.

The research conducted has some limitations, as analyzing the specific case of Qatargate does not allow for the generalization of findings to other corruption scandals or similar political contexts within or outside the European Union. Furthermore, although the link between the awarding of the 2022 FIFA World Cup and the corruption scandal is addressed, the research did not delve into how sports can be used as a tool of political and economic influence.

Based on all this, future lines of research could focus on investigating current deficiencies in lobbying regulation and making comparisons with other international models to propose a uniform and effective regulatory framework. Additionally, it would be interesting to analyze how major sporting events can be used as tools of political and economic influence, examining the role of certain international institutions in these dynamics. Another future line of research could focus on investigating other recent corruption

cases in the EU to identify common patterns in improper practices and develop preventive strategies.

Qatargate is a case that has highlighted the structural weaknesses in lobbying regulation within the European Union and that corruption in decision-making not only affects institutional integrity but also jeopardizes the credibility of the European Union on the international stage. It is imperative, therefore, to strengthen lobbying regulations and increase transparency between political actors and external actors to prevent future scandals like this. Key to this will be the implementation of stricter measures and the creation of independent supervisory bodies to restore confidence in European institutions and ensure more ethical and responsible governance.

One of the biggest corruption scandals in the history of the European Parliament, with implications not only legal and political but also in the relations between the European Union and countries such as Qatar and Morocco, is represented by Qatargate. A case that not only puts the spotlight on corruption and the role of lobbies, but also on the need to profoundly review the mechanisms of control and transparency in the European institutions, carrying out internal reforms of the Parliament as a key to restoring confidence in the institutions, as also stated in their conclusions by Carta (2023), Parisi and Rinoldi (2023), Costa (2024), and Hegewald and Schraff (2024).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not required, for either participation in the study or for the publication of potentially/indirectly identifying information, in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements.

References

- Álvarez, M. I., and De Montalvo, F. (2014). Los lobbies en el marco de la Unión Europea: Una reflexión a propósito de su regulación en España. *Teor. Real. Const.* 1, 353–376. doi: 10.5944/trc.33.2014.13025
- Andersen, S., and Eliassen, K. A. (1991). European Community Lobbying. *Euro. J. Polit. Res.* 20, 173–187. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-6765.1991.tb00262.x
- Arceo, A., and Álvarez, S. (2023). La necesidad de regular las actividades de lobbying en España: Un camino hacia la estandarización de la transparencia. *IROCAMM* 6, 9–22. doi: 10.12795/IROCAMM.2023.v06.i02.01
- Asociación de Profesionales de las Relaciones Públicas (2024). *Asociación de Profesionales de las Relaciones Públicas*. Available online at: <https://relacionesinstitucionales.es/> (accessed November 7, 2024).
- Baumgartner, F. R. (2007). EU Lobbying: a view from the US. *J. Eur. Public Policy* 14, 482–488. doi: 10.1080/13501760701243830
- Bernhagen, P. (2014). Lobbying in the European Union: interest groups, lobbying coalitions, and policy change. *West Eur. Polit.* 37, 1196–1197. doi: 10.1080/01402382.2014.924712
- Blanco, G. E. (2024). *Código de lobbies*. Madrid: BOE.
- Carta, M. C. (2023). L'istituzione dell'organismo europeo indipendente responsabile delle questioni di etica alla prova del qatargate. *Ordine Internazionale e Diritti Umani* 1, 50–79. Available online at: <https://www.rivistaoidu.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/CARTA-RIV.pdf> (accessed November 8, 2024).
- Castillo, A., and Almansa, A. (2014). *Relaciones Públicas y Lobby. Análisis de su presencia en la Unión Europea*. Available online at: <https://congreso.pucp.edu.pe/alaic2014/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/GT2-Antonio-Castillo-Esparcia.pdf> (accessed October 28, 2024).

Author contributions

MF-T: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RC-S: Conceptualization, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article. This research was funded by “Lobby y Comunicación en la Unión Europea” of the Ministry of Science and Innovation (Spain), the State R+D+I Programme for Proofs of Concept of the State Programme for Societal Challenges, the State Programme for Scientific, Technical, and Innovation Research, 2020–2023 (PID2020-118584RB-100) and by the University of Malaga.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

- Castillo, A., and Fernández, M. J., and Castellero, E. (2016). Fútbol y redes sociales. Análisis de la gestión de Relaciones Públicas 2.0 por los clubes de fútbol. *Estud. Mens. Period.* 22, 239–254. doi: 10.5209/rev_ESMP.2016.v22.n1.52592
- Castillo, A., and Smolak, E., and Fernández, A. (2017). Lobby y comunicación en España. Análisis de su presencia en los diarios de referencia. *Rev. Latina Com. Soc.* 72, 783–264. doi: 10.4185/RLCS-2017-1192
- Celis, J. B. (1963). *Los grupos de presión en las democracias contemporáneas: Gran Bretaña, Francia y Estados Unidos de América*. Madrid: Tecnos.
- Consejo de Administración del Registro de Transparencia (2023). *Informe Anual sobre el funcionamiento del Registro de Transparencia 2023*. Available online at: https://transparency-register.europa.eu/document/download/0b39bbcf-231b-4d77-87d1-15b676343daf_es?filename=TR%20AR2023_ES.pdf (accessed November 5, 2024).
- Costa, O. (2024). The European parliament and the qatargate. *JCMS* 62, 1–12. doi: 10.1111/jcms.13666
- Esteban, J. (2017). *Moneyball, el negocio del fútbol moderno. El Orden Mundial, 21 de agosto*. Available online at: <https://elordenmundial.com/moneyball-el-negocio-del-futbol-moderno/> (accessed October 30, 2024).
- Fruh, K., Archer, A., and Wojtcwicz, J. (2023). Sportswashing: complicity and corruption. *Sport Ethics Philos.* 17, 101–118. doi: 10.1080/17511321.2022.2107697
- Greenwood, J. (2018). *Interest Representation in the European Union*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hegewald, S., and Schraff, D. (2024). Corruption and trust in the European parliament: quasi-experimental evidence from the qatargate scandal. *Euro. J. Polit. Res.* 63, 1674–1685. doi: 10.1111/1475-6765.12654
- Krippendorff, K. (2013). *Content Analysis. An Introduction to Its Methodology* (3rd ed). California, CA: Sage Publications.
- López-Aranguren, E. (2015). “Análisis de contenido”, in *El análisis de la realidad social: métodos y técnicas de investigación*, comps. M. García, F.R. Alvira, L.E. Alonso and M. Escobar, (Madrid, Alianza Editorial), 461–493.
- Martínez, J. (1998). “Lobbying. Relaciones Públicas Políticas,” in *Manual de Relaciones Públicas Empresariales e Institucionales*, ed. coord. J.D. Barquero (Barcelona, Gestión 2000), 731–747.
- Moral, P. (2018). *Estrellas de Oriente: la diplomacia deportiva en el golfo pérsico, El Orden Mundial, 22 de marzo*. Available online at: <https://elordenmundial.com/estrellas-de-oriente-la-diplomacia-deportiva-en-el-golfo-persico/> (accessed October 30, 2024).
- Navarro, J., and Andrés, C. (2016). Lobbying. *ECONOMÍA. Rev. Cult. Legal.* 10, 191–201.
- OECD (2021). *Lobbying in the 21st Century: Transparency, Integrity and Access*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Parisi, N., and Rinoldi, D. G. (2023). Lo “spazio” del diritto penale fra sopranationalità (dell’Unione europea) e nazionalismo (italiano) alla luce della controversa vicenda “Qatargate”. *Free. Secur. Justice. Eur. Leg. Stud.* 3, 14–26. doi: 10.26321/N.PARISID.G.RINOLDI.03.2023.02
- Pérez, M. C. (2023). “Es corrupción la actividad lobista? La respuesta penal frente al fenómeno lobby en el entorno de la Unión Europea. *Rev. Electr. Cienc. Penal Criminol.* 25, 1–41. Available online at: <http://criminol.ugr.es/recpc/25/recpc25-10.pdf> (accessed November 8, 2024).
- Quintana, L. (2023). “Lobbies y estrategias de comunicación en casos de corrupción. Encuadre del Qatargate en la Unión Europea”, in *Universos distópicos y manipulación en la comunicación contemporánea: del periodismo a las series pasando por la política*, ed. coords.M. V. Guarinos and M. Blanco, (Madrid, Dykinson), 41–60.
- Ramos, M. L. (1997). La dimensión política de los movimientos sociales: algunos problemas conceptuales. *REIS* 79, 247–263. doi: 10.2307/40184015
- Revuelta, A., and Villoria, M. (2016). “La regulación de los grupos de interés como instrumento de prevención de la corrupción”, in *La corrupción en España. Ámbitos, causas y remedios jurídicos*, ed. coords. M. Villoria, J.M. Gimeno and J. Tejedor, (Barcelona: Atelier), 409–434.
- Ron, L. A. (2018). *El deporte como política exterior de Qatar, Academia.edu*. Available online at: https://www.academia.edu/39316344/El_deporte_como_pol%C3%ADtica_exterior_de_Qatar (accessed October 30, 2024).
- Transparencia Internacional España (2022). *Lobby y Qatargate: Preguntas Clave*. Available online at: <https://transparencia.org.es/wp-content/uploads/lobbies-y-Qatargate-preguntas-claves-2.pdf> (accessed October 30, 2024).
- Villoria, M., and Fernández-Rúa, J. (2017). *La regulación de la actividad del lobby en el poder ejecutivo: lecciones internacionales*. Madrid: Transparency International España.
- Villoria, M., and Revuelta, A. (2015). “Transparencia y regulación del lobby en Europa y España. Los retos de los grupos de interés: profesionalización, regulación, transparencia y legitimidad democrática”, *XII Congreso de la Asociación Española de Ciencias Políticas y de la Administración, Dónde está hoy el poder*. San Sebastián, del 13 al 15 de julio. Available in: *Transparencia y regulación del lobby en Europa y España: un análisis c* (accessed December 3, 2024).
- Xifra, J. (1998). *Cómo influir eficazmente en las decisiones de las instituciones públicas*. Barcelona: Gestión 2000.