

Qatari-European Relations Damaged by Qatargate, Aggravating EU Energy Crisis

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Qatar has been into the spotlight largely due to it having hosted the Fifa Football Cup in 2022. Western notions regarding LGBT and gender rights motivated a lot of media and activism criticism against the nation. Now, Qatar is once again a hot topic in Europe because of the so-called Qatargate. It is, in short, about European authorities having received gifts from Qatari authorities in what has been denounced as a kind of bribery. In December Eva Kaili, a European Parliament vice president was arrested over such charges, and three others are being investigated.

Much has been talked about the scandal, and Ursula von der Leyen herself, European Commission President, has even stated that it undermines trust in European institutions. Similarly, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock has talked about European credibility being on the line. Such a statement, Caroline de Gruyter (a Foreign Policy correspondent) argues, could be premature.

One should keep in mind that, so far, there is not enough evidence linking any European institution – other than the European Parliament – to the so-called Qatargate. There are however, according to some media stories, in Germany, for example, suspicions about the problem that goes beyond European Union institutions and beyond Qatar itself, as the supposed role of Morocco is also being investigated.

In 2021, Qatar played an important role in trying to [mediate between Saudi Arabia and its rival Iran](#). The same year, a landmark “solidarity and stability” agreement was signed between Qatar on one hand, and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain on the other, thus re-establishing full diplomatic relations with Doha and ending a three-year-old Gulf crisis and blockade on Qatar. Ever since, its diplomatic soft power has been increasing in the region and beyond.

The small Gulf nation has one of the world's largest sovereign funds and it seeks to use its wealth to secure geopolitical influence and protection. In doing so, the Qatari authorities in

Doha are not alone: other Gulf states employ similar policies.

Washington's Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft lobby expert Ben Freeman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Qatar are not part of the 10 largest spenders at lobbying firms in Washington DC.

In 2017, de Gruyter reminds us, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia heavily boycotted Qatar. In response, the country, in the US alone, quadrupled its lobbying budget and, similarly, also has been sponsoring media companies, think tanks and so on in Europe. Doha has also invested heavily in paying 440,000 pounds' worth of trips to UK law-makers over the last decade.

Bilateral relations between Doha and Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) have improved, but those between the former and the UAE are still far from good.

Belgian authorities have so far charged four people linked to the European Parliament over corruption accusations regarding Qatari gifts supposedly aimed at influencing decision-making. Pertaining to this investigation, Qatari authorities deny having done anything illegal - the cultural institution of wasfa (involving favors and gifts) clashes with Western notions of corruption. While there must be mechanisms to avoid decision-makers being seduced by expensive gifts or "bought off", a very strict Western understanding of corruption in such matters can potentially hamper intercultural dialogue and diplomatic understanding with such Arab nations, thus also hampering trade.

In December 2022, the European Parliament suspended all work on legislation pertaining to Qatar. The country's representatives have been barred from accessing the Parliament's premises. A statement from Doha's mission to the EU said "preconceived prejudices" were behind this suspension, which affects an EU-Qatar aviation agreement and legislation related to visa liberalization, among other things. The diplomatic statement described it as "discriminatory restriction" and added that no effort had been made to engage with Qatar's government in order to establish the facts.

The timing is not so good: the Gulf nation, which is a major liquified natural gas (LNG) exporter, was a vital piece in the European plans for coping with its energy crisis. In October 2022, Qatari energy minister Saad al-Kaabi warned that by 2023 Europe is to face a tougher crisis, with the depletion of its gas reserves - a situation which can extend itself even up to 2025.

So far, the overall imports of LNG from Qatar are just about 5 percent of the European bloc gas imports, according to European Commission data. However, Doha has two ongoing megaprojects, due to be completed by 2027, which are expected to make its LNG production capacity grow tremendously. In November 2022, Berlin signed a 15-year gas contract with US company ConocoPhillips plus QatarEnergy, which is state-owned, to ensure at least 2 million metric tons of LNG annually, starting from 2026. Italy and several other European countries are eyeing Qatar too, according to Cinzia Bianco, a European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) research fellow on the Gulf.

Pragmatically speaking, energy security is usually considered to be more important than Western discourses on human rights and such a corruption scandal. This is why Belgian MEP Marc Tarabella's lawyer claimed his client's change of discourse on Qatar could be explained by "[realpolitik](#)" - not corruption

In post-Nord Stream Europe, amid an economic, financial and energy crisis, Europeans today suffer the consequences of anti-Russian sanctions which have [backfired](#) and also of an American [subsidy and trade war](#) waged against their companies. In this context, Europe has sought to further enhance its trade and energy ties with countries such as Qatar and Morocco (which competes with [Algeria](#)).

Much has been talked about the need for stricter European anti-corruption pieces of legislation. The exact role and the acceptable boundaries of lobbying must also be discussed. The problem however is much deeper, and even Qatar itself and other countries cannot provide an easy alternative to [Europe's woes](#), as shown, for example, by this latest scandal, and by [Algerian-Moroccan problems](#).

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