

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

HOW THE TOBACCO

LOBBY INFLUENCES THE EUROPEAN UNION AND BEYOND



A GLOBAL
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INDUSTRY
WATCHDOG

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The tobacco industry lobbies governments all over the world to delay, weaken or block policies that could hurt its profits, and to promote policies that would perpetuate the tobacco epidemic, which kills 7 million people every year.

Parties to a global treaty, the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), are obliged to implement a set of measures designed to protect present and future generations from the harms of tobacco products and the tobacco industry. This involves protecting health policies from the tobacco industry, notably through transparency measures. Analysis shows that the European Union, a Party to the treaty and a region heavily affected by the tobacco epidemic, is not fully adhering to these measures, and that the tobacco industry is exploiting these gaps to influence policies and harm health both in the EU and beyond.

To document the industry's extensive lobbying presence and activity in the EU, Contre-Feu and STOP analysed data published on the EU Transparency Register, the official public database where lobbyists are required to declare their activities; the database of meetings between Members of the European Parliament and lobbyists; and documents obtained through a series of freedom of information (FOI) requests concerning interactions between different Directorates-General (DGs) of the European Commission (EC) and the tobacco industry.

The analysis shows that industry lobbying is ever-present, not always publicly declared and may be derailing lifesaving policies; tobacco use is increasing in the EU, according to the 2025 WHO global report on trends in prevalence of tobacco use.¹

KEY FINDINGS

— The tobacco industry has a large and active presence in the EU. At least 49 organisations are actively seeking to influence European policymakers and civil servants on behalf of the tobacco industry. Together, these organisations reported employing at least 139 people and spending nearly €14 million (US \$16.2 million) per year on lobbying activities targeting EU decision-makers.

— In recent years, new lobby groups promoting the industry's self-serving version of 'tobacco harm reduction' have multiplied, reflecting the reorientation of part industry's lobbying efforts towards promoting new tobacco and nicotine products, which it claims are safer. 8 of the 15 organisations in this category were established within the past three years.

— Current transparency rules aren't working. In the European Parliament, 257 meetings with tobacco lobbyists were recorded between 2023 and 2025. As for the EU Commission, it has only declared five meetings with the industry in that period, while Contre-Feu and STOP uncovered multiple additional but undeclared interactions, particularly with DG TRADE, the European Commission department that manages trade policy and the EU's trade relations with non-EU countries.

— Countries the industry has invested in tend to be its strongest advocates. For example, the tobacco industry claims to have invested several hundred million euros in factories to manufacture heated tobacco products (HTPs) in several Member States, primarily Italy and Greece. These Member States have since defended industry positions at the EU Council level.

— The tobacco industry is trying to use the European Commission as a lever to challenge tobacco control policies in non-EU countries, including in low- and middle-income countries. Documents uncovered in FOI requests to the European Commission suggest ongoing industry attempts to mobilize EU institutions against public health policies in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, India, Japan, Mexico, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Türkiye and Vietnam, often by framing these policies as trade barriers.

Current rules to limit industry influence are falling short and European policymakers continue to be heavily lobbied by the tobacco industry and those working on its behalf.

The concerns raised by the European Ombudsman in 2023 that the European Union was not sufficiently transparent in its dealings with the tobacco industry are still relevant today. In this respect, the EU is failing to fully honour its commitment to the WHO FCTC, particularly to Article 5.3, which mandates that Parties must limit their interactions with the tobacco industry to those which are strictly necessary, and must make all interactions transparent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure full transparency, protect policies and public health and ensure that the industry no longer uses the EU for its own benefit:

01

The EU and all of its institutions must further implement and ensure compliance with Article 5.3 of the FCTC. Current transparency measures are often restricted to specific meetings and individuals (such as staff in management positions or certain departments or DGs of the European Commission), when they should apply to all staff who have any contact with the tobacco industry. Moreover, these obligations should be accompanied by dissuasive sanctions and strict controls. Finally, interactions with decision-makers should only occur when strictly necessary.

02

Improved compliance to Article 5.3 must also result in more transparency with respect to freedom of information (FOI) requests made by civil society concerning contacts with the tobacco industry. The commercial interests of the tobacco industry cannot take precedence over the disclosure of documents concerning contacts between lobbyists and public decision-makers, as has been the case with the documents in this report.

03

The EU must commit to safeguarding its diplomatic influence, particularly in the field of international trade, from being exploited by the industry to challenge or undermine tobacco control measures implemented by other countries, particularly those that are signatories to the FCTC. As such, no discussions between EU institutions and the tobacco industry regarding tobacco control policies implemented by third countries should be permitted. Governments around the world must also reject the tobacco industry's attempts to use trade as a means of influencing health policy.

These recommendations should not only be enacted as a code of conduct or informal internal rules; they must also be amended in the form of directly applicable and binding legislative or regulatory texts. In this case, this could mean making an explicit reference to the tobacco industry and the FCTC in both the Interinstitutional Agreement of 20 May 2021 and Regulation No. 1049 of 30 May 2001 on public access to documents of the institutions of the European Union as well as in the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament.

As the tobacco industry steps up its efforts to renew its customer base and continue its deadly trade, which has caused considerable damage across Europe and beyond, it is crucial that EU institutions lead by example in implementing the FCTC.