

Opinion
of the
Independent Ethical Committee
established
by the European Commission
14 March 2025

Subject: Request for an opinion on Former Commissioner Urpilainen’s envisaged post term of office activity as Member of the Africa-Europe Women Leaders Network

On request of the President of the European Commission, the Independent Ethical Committee, composed of Mr Allan Rosas, Ms Elisabeth Morin-Chartier and Jerzy Plewa, delivers the present opinion:

Procedure

1. On 12 December 2025, the Secretary-General of the Commission asked the Committee, on behalf of the President of the Commission, to deliver an opinion on the compatibility of Former Commissioner Urpilainen’s envisaged activity as Member of the Africa-Europe Women Leaders Network (‘the Women Leaders Network’) with Article 245 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).
2. In response to a request for further clarification from the Committee and transmitted by the Secretary-General on 6 February 2025, Former Commissioner Urpilainen provided additional information on 10 February 2025.

Facts

3. The Africa-Europe Women Leaders Network was created in 2021 by the Africa-Europe Foundation ⁽¹⁾ to facilitate collaboration between leading women from Africa and Europe.
4. It brings together personalities from both continents to transform dialogue into action on key challenges such as job creation, healthcare, and climate change, while promoting a stronger partnership between the two continents.

(1) <https://www.africaeuropefoundation.org/>, last consulted on 28 February 2025.

5. According to information provided by Former Commissioner Urpilainen, the network meets on average every two months, with discussions focused on areas such as health, agriculture, energy, transport, and digital issues.
6. These activities include regular meetings and exchanges that provide a platform for addressing key challenges. The network's discussions are facilitated under the Chatham House Rule encouraging open, informal, and trusted dialogue. ⁽²⁾
7. According to Former Commissioner Urpilainen, the Africa-Europe Foundation also gathers Women Leaders Network members in person at least twice a year for a public advocacy push. In 2024, this related to the Clean Cooking Summit for Africa and the UN Summit of the Future.
8. The Women Leaders Network is directly connected to the work of the Africa-Europe Foundation Strategy and working groups.

Organisation of the Women Leaders Network

9. The Women Leaders Network functions under the institutional umbrella of the Africa-Europe Foundation. Former Commissioner Urpilainen described the Africa-Europe Foundation as a consortium entity founded by a leading European think tank, Friends of Europe, and a leading African Foundation, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, in partnership with the African Climate Foundation and the ONE Campaign and with a multitude of stakeholders from civil society, business, policymaking and the youth sector across Africa and Europe. The Africa-Europe Foundation is governed by a two-tier Board, comprising a High-Level Group (bringing together some of the world's most influential personalities from Africa and Europe) and an Executive Board (represented by the founding partners of the organisation).
10. According to publicly available information, the Africa-Europe Foundation facilitates the Women Leaders Network's activities, strategy, and partnerships.
11. The Women Leaders Network is chaired by the Honorary Presidents of the Africa-Europe Foundation: Ms. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Former President of the Republic of Liberia and Nobel Laureate, and Ms. Mary Robinson, first woman President of Ireland and Chair of the Elders.
12. According to publicly available information, the Africa-Europe Foundation is described as responsible for overarching strategic decisions and coordination of the Women Leaders Network.

⁽²⁾ Participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

Former Commissioner Urpilainen's envisaged position

13. Former Commissioner Urpilainen has been invited to join the Africa-Europe Women Leaders Network as a member. This is a non-remunerated position.
14. Members of the Women Leaders Network participate in regular discussions and meetings to deliberate on pressing issues, contribute to the development of actionable recommendations and strategies and advocate for the implementation of agreed-upon actions within their respective spheres of influence.
15. However, specific details about the functions of individual members, particularly former Commissioners, are not publicly detailed.
16. In response to an additional question from the Committee regarding the functions of individual members of the network, Former Commissioner Urpilainen clarified that the principal function is to take part in special dialogues to collaborate with other African and European experienced leaders on strategies to increase cross-continental cooperation and reinforce Africa-Europe cooperation at the multilateral level. Former Commissioner Urpilainen further explained that each meeting has a thematic focus and often an expert briefing to feed the discussion or an insight from one of the heads of international organisations affiliated to the network.

Funding of the Women Leaders Network

17. While no public information is available on the funding of the Africa-Europe Women Leaders Network, the Transparency Register of the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission provides information regarding the funding of the Africa-Europe Foundation.
18. In 2023 ⁽³⁾, the Africa-Europe Foundation received a total of 1,256,462 EUR in EU grants, including 182,510 EUR from the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA) and 1,073,952 EUR from the European Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), which worked under the authority of Former Commissioner Urpilainen.
19. This webpage also indicates that on 9 July 2024, the Africa-Europe Foundation held a steering meeting in Brussels with the Director-General of DG INTPA.
20. However, there is no publicly available information regarding the budget of the Women Leaders Network.
21. In response to additional questions from the Committee regarding the specific powers of the Africa-Europe Foundation over the Women Leaders Network, the existence of

⁽³⁾ This is the most recent closed financial year detailed on the Transparency Register ([organisation detail - European Union](#), last consulted on 28 February 2025).

an independent budget of the Women Leaders Network and whether the Women Leaders Network apply, directly or indirectly, for EU funding, Former Commissioner Urpilainen replied that “[t]he Women Leaders Network is an independent group and does not apply for any funding from the European Union or other sources. The Africa Europe Foundation acts as secretariat in helping support the online and in person meetings of the Women Leaders Network and this resourcing is specifically from a budget from the [Africa-Europe Foundation] founders (eg. Mo Ibrahim Foundation) and not any institution.”

Legal context

22. Article 245 TFEU provides:

The Members of the Commission shall refrain from any action incompatible with their duties. Member States shall respect their independence and shall not seek to influence them in the performance of their tasks.

The Members of the Commission may not, during their term of office, engage in any other occupation, whether gainful or not. When entering upon their duties they shall give a solemn undertaking that, both during and after their term of office, they will respect the obligations arising therefrom and in particular their duty to behave with integrity and discretion as regards the acceptance, after they have ceased to hold office, of certain appointments or benefits. In the event of any breach of these obligations, the Court of Justice may, on application by the Council acting by a simple majority or the Commission, rule that the Member concerned be, according to the circumstances, either compulsorily retired in accordance with Article 247 or deprived of his right to a pension or other benefits in its stead.

23. Article 15(1) and (2) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union provides:

1. Everyone has the right to engage in work and to pursue a freely chosen or accepted occupation.

2. Every citizen of the Union has the freedom to seek employment, to work, to exercise the right of establishment and to provide services in any Member State.

24. Article 2(7) of the Code of Conduct for the Members of the European Commission (hereafter the ‘Code of Conduct’) provides:

7. Former Members shall respect the obligations arising from their duties that continue to have an effect after their term, in particular the duty to behave with integrity and discretion as regards the acceptance of certain appointments or

benefits in line with Article 245 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and the obligations specified in this Code of Conduct.

25. Article 5 of the Code of Conduct provides:

1. Members shall comply with the duty of loyalty towards the Commission and discretion in discharging their duties. They shall act and express themselves with the restraint that their office requires.

2. Members shall refrain from disclosing what is said at meetings of the Commission.

3. Without prejudice to the disciplinary provisions applicable to officials and other agents, Members are responsible for the proper handling and any external transmission by members of their Cabinets of classified documents, of sensitive information or of confidential documents submitted to the College for adoption or information.

4. Members shall not make any comment that would call into question a decision taken by the Commission or which may harm the Commission's reputation.

26. Article 11 of the Code of Conduct provides:

1. After ceasing to hold office, former Members shall continue to be bound by their duty of integrity and discretion pursuant to Article 245 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. They shall continue to be bound by the duties of collegiality and discretion, as laid down in Article 5, with respect to the Commission's decisions and activities during their term of office.

2. Former Members shall inform the Commission with a minimum of two months' notice of their intention to engage in a professional activity during a period of two years after they have ceased to hold office. For the purposes of the present Code, 'professional activity' means any professional activity, whether gainful or not, other than any unpaid activity which has no link with the activities of the European Union and which does not give rise to lobbying or advocacy vis-à-vis the Commission and its services such as:

(a) charitable or humanitarian activities;

(b) activities deriving from political, trade unionist and/or philosophical or religious convictions;

(c) cultural activities;

(d) the mere management of assets or holdings or personal or family fortune, in a private capacity;

(e) or comparable activities.

3. The Commission shall examine the information provided in order to determine whether the nature of the planned activity is compatible with Article 245 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and if the planned activity is related to the portfolio of the former Member, it shall decide only after having consulted the Independent Ethical Committee.

Without prejudice to the possibility for the President to seek its opinion in cases of doubt, the Independent Ethical Committee does not need to be consulted where former Members intend to:

- (a) continue to serve the European interest in an Institution or Body of the European Union;*
- (b) take up functions in the national civil service of a Member State (at national, regional or local level);*
- (c) engage with international organisations or other international bodies dealing with public interests and in which either the EU or one or several of its Member States are represented;*
- (d) engage in academic activities;*
- (e) engage in one-off activities for a short duration (1 or 2 working days);*
- (f) accept honorary appointments.*

4. Former Members shall not lobby Members or their staff on behalf of their own business, that of their employer or client, on matters for which they were responsible within their portfolio for a period of two years after ceasing to hold office.

5. In the case of a former President, the periods set out in paragraphs (2) and (4) shall be three years.

6. The duties set out in paragraphs (2) and (4) shall not apply where the former Member is engaging in public office.

7. Decisions taken under paragraph (3) determining compatibility with Article 245 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and related opinions of the Independent Ethical Committee shall be made public with due consideration to the protection of personal data.

Opinion

27. The Committee notes that Members of the Commission have a right to engage in work and to pursue a freely chosen or accepted occupation after the term of their office. This right needs to be balanced with the obligations set out in Article 245 TFEU and the Code of Conduct for the Members of the European Commission, which develops these obligations in more detail.
28. The Committee also notes that the work of the Women Leaders Network is linked to Former Commissioner Urpilainen's portfolio "International Partnerships".
29. Former Commissioner Urpilainen will be engaging in networking activities and discussions with other leaders. The activity is not related to the acquisition or distribution of funds and does not involve any direct activities of lobbying the EU institutions. Moreover, the Committee notes that the objectives of the Women Leaders Network are widely shared at global level, including by the European Union.
30. The Committee considers that Former Commissioner Urpilainen's envisaged activity does not represent a risk with regard to the interests of the Commission.
31. The Committee therefore does not identify any legal or other impediments to accepting the functions as long as Former Commissioner Urpilainen respects the obligations set out in the Treaties and the Code of Conduct.
32. The Commission might however wish to recall that Former Commissioner Urpilainen remains bound by Article 11(4) of the Code of Conduct, laying down the obligation to refrain from lobbying⁽⁴⁾ Members or staff of the European Commission on behalf of the Women Leaders Network on matters for which she was responsible within her portfolio for a period of two years after ceasing to hold office. This does not affect a possible participation in public events or general exchanges of, and on, publicly available information with Members of the European Commission or its staff.
33. The Commission's decision should also recall that Former Commissioner Urpilainen must strictly respect Article 339 TFEU, which provides that "[t]he members of the institutions of the Union, the members of committees, and the officials and other servants of the Union shall be required, even after their duties have ceased, not to

⁽⁴⁾ The term 'lobbying' means any activity carried out with the objective of influencing the formulation or implementation of policy or legislation, or the decision-making processes of the Commission as set out in Article 3 of Interinstitutional Agreement of 20 May 2021 between the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission on a mandatory transparency register; it includes indirect lobbying on behalf of clients through indirect measures with the same objective of influencing the formulation or implementation of policy or legislation, or the decision-making processes of the Commission such as organising or participating in meetings, conferences, events or consultation or hearings, organising communication campaigns or the preparation of position papers and applies independently of the location; it also covers any activity with a view to obtaining EU funding.

disclose information of the kind covered by the obligation of professional secrecy, in particular information about undertakings, their business relations or their cost components.”

34. Additionally, the decision should recall that Former Commissioner Urpilainen remains bound by the duties of collegiality and discretion, as laid down in Article 5 of the Code of Conduct, with respect to the Commission's decisions and activities during his terms of office. She must not disclose anything said at meetings of the Commission, or call into question decisions taken by the Commission during these periods.
35. In addition, the decision should recall that Former Commissioner Urpilainen must show in general a high sense of discretion with regard to the use of information and insights that she obtained in the performance of her duties.
36. Therefore, based on the above-mentioned information and considerations, the Committee concludes that the envisaged activity would be compatible with Article 245 TFEU.

Allan Rosas

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