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## EU transport chief quits his post over free Qatar flights

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A top European Union official is leaving his role in charge of transport policy, following [POLITICO's revelations](#) that he accepted free flights on Qatar Airways while his team negotiated a major aviation deal with the Gulf state.

Henrik Hololei, director general of the European Commission's transport department, faced an internal investigation into the flights, and whether he was right to clear himself of any conflict of interest.

On Wednesday, POLITICO revealed Hololei will leave his job as director general of the transport department, known in the Brussels lexicon as DG MOVE, and will become a political adviser with no management responsibility in DG INTPA, the Commission's department in charge of international partnerships.

A spokesperson for the Commission later confirmed to reporters that Hololei would move to his new role on April 1.

Hololei himself announced his job switch in an email to staff. "Dear friends and colleagues," Hololei wrote. "I wanted to let you know myself that Friday will be my last day at DG MOVE. I am sure that you have seen the recent press coverage of my participation in international conferences.

"This has become a distraction, and is preventing DG MOVE from moving forward with the files that are so important for the safer, more sustainable, smarter and more resilient transport system that Europe needs and deserves," he said. "I have asked to be moved to another position, which I will take up at DG INTPA."

POLITICO reported a month ago that Hololei [flew business class for free](#) on Qatar Airways nine times between 2015 and 2021, according to details [obtained](#) through freedom of information requests. Six of the free flights occurred while the market access agreement between the EU and Doha was being put together, and four of these were paid for by the government of Qatar or a group with links to Qatar.

The disclosures immediately triggered a storm of criticism, calls for an inquiry and demands to overhaul the rules. The Commission initially insisted Hololei had not

broken any rules, but then later moved to tighten those same rules to make sure his behavior could not be repeated in future. An internal investigation is under way into the flights, after officials confirmed that Hololei himself had been the person who signed off on the ethical question of whether they represented a conflict of interest.

In recent days, POLITICO has reported on calls from within the Commission for Hololei to [step aside](#).

The episode comes at a highly sensitive time for the EU. The Brussels institutions are already battling to save their reputation amid a [corruption scandal](#) involving allegations that Qatar and other foreign governments paid MEPs and others to do their bidding in the European Parliament.

Ursula von der Leyen, president of the Commission, vowed in light of the so-called Qatargate scandal to crack down on corruption, throwing her weight behind the idea of an ethical oversight body that would be able to probe and penalize misdeeds across all EU institutions.

While the Parliament is undergoing reforms to avoid future corruption problems, the Commission and the Council of the EU have not been involved in the scandal and stopped short of announcing any internal changes as a result.

But the Hololei case, which centered on a senior official closely involved with a major transport deal crucial to the Gulf state, widened the focus of scrutiny to include the European Commission, which is in charge proposing EU legislation.

**(POLITICO)**