

# Q&A: Yann Baden, president of StopCorrupt

Hannah Brenton—08.12.2017 07:02

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Luxembourg's branch of Transparency International broke away from the network and rebranded under the name 'StopCorrupt' in November. The independent organisation will continue with the aim of fighting corruption in the Grand-Duchy – but without the Transparency International banner under which it has operated since 2009.



(Image: Sébastien Héraud)

*Hannah Brenton spoke to Yann Baden, president and one of four founders of the association – who, somewhat ironically, declined to provide a photo for this article – about the decision to leave and what corruption looks like in Luxembourg.*

## **Why did your organisation leave Transparency International?**

To explain why we left, I need to backtrack a little. Transparency International was created in 1993, with the financial assistance of the World Bank, with the aim of fighting corruption, essentially in what they called Third World countries at the time.

It was essentially the part of Africa where they had those huge difficulties with extractive industries, where huge bribes were being paid to government officials, and the population of the country was left poor, very poor. Those who benefited were the companies, the Western companies that did their business there, and the government officials – and nobody else.

## **What was Transparency's ethos at that time?**

Transparency always said we also speak to the corrupt. We speak to everybody and we want to effect change with the help of the corrupt people. We need to effect change from within because we cannot essentially effect change from outside.

### **Has that changed?**

It has changed in a number of ways inasmuch as it has become more publicly outspoken than it has before. It has dropped [its] policy of "no naming, no shaming" because it is now saying, well, these people are corrupt, and we need to change something with these people.

And it has also changed a little bit, maybe not fully, saying, 'well, we want to effect change from within'. They have accepted to some degree that part of the job needs to be done from the outside.

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Yann Baden

### **Did the Luxembourg branch disagree with these changes?**

We continued to believe rightly or wrongly in the policies set out by Transparency International in the beginning – meaning specifically the policy that we want to effect change from within, and that we continue to use the policy of "no naming, no shaming".

It is not really the biggest issue of whether Mr X or Mr Y has been corrupt in the past. If law enforcement is doing its work as it should, then these people will have it coming, whatever they have coming. What is important for the population, for the country as such, is that the system be adapted so that these behaviours cannot take place.

### **Was that the only reason?**

For a small chapter like ours – it is a small organisation – the percentage of resources that was used for networking was becoming so important we could not sustain it.



**STOP**  
**CORRUPT**

The association has rebranded as StopCorrupt and will continue to fight corruption in the Grand-Duchy.

## **Are you concerned you will not be taken as seriously without the credos of Transparency International?**

The logo of Transparency International is very well-known – you have, as you say, certain credos to what you do, and you have both national and also international access to a certain public who know Transparency International. That is certainly the case, and that is gone.

*“I believe certain behaviours should not be – they cannot be – and that people need to stand up for what they believe in.”* Yann Baden

There are some disadvantages, and it is, at the end of the day, a judgement call whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

I'm not sure it is really within Luxembourg, the biggest of disadvantages.

## **What is the source of your funding?**

The source of funding is actually threefold. We have a limited amount of membership dues, and then we have a small number of donors – one being the government. And then the most important part of the fundraising we do is participate in projects that are publicly tendered, normally within the European Commission, on work related to corruption.

## **What motivates you to be involved in it?**

I believe certain behaviours should not be – they cannot be – and that people need to stand up for what they believe in. I believe in that, and I stand up for it.

## **Which behaviours do you mean?**

Corruption and related behaviours.

## **What does corruption really look like in Luxembourg?**

You probably don't have a lot of still petty bribery that you might have in less developed countries, where you need a €50 bill in your passport to get through customs.

What you do have in Luxembourg is a more subtle, more difficult, more business-related version of corruption, where you would have people where, within the realm of their business, they require decisions and use their leverage.

The other part of corruption that is certainly an issue in Luxembourg is not the offence itself but related offences like laundering of corruption related-funding.

Then, of course, the last item, which is a little bit different, you do have a certain number of international companies headquartered in Luxembourg that might have dealings in countries where corruption is prevalent – and they need to see how they can deal with that.

## **Luxembourg is often singled out as a place where tax avoidance can take place – is that a priority for your organisation?**

Tax avoidance per se is not our core business. Our core business is the fight against corruption. It does have points of contact with the fight against corruption, but we do not specialise in tax evasion or tax-related issues. We obviously see and know and hear all those Paradise Papers, Panama Papers and so on and so forth.

### **Do the Paradise Papers not raise concerns about corruption?**

Let me put it this way – neither the Panama Papers nor Paradise Papers raise any new concerns. It may have put names on certain information, but it hasn't provided any really new information.

### **Do they not provide transparency?**

That is a difficult point. Transparency for me is not the name per se. Transparency for me is a means to achieve an aim.

*“Nobody wants transparency in his private life. You would not want that everybody could read on the internet what your finances were and who you slept with yesterday.”* Yann Baden

Everybody wants, and I think we can all agree the way government works should be transparent, so we want transparency in a public administration – I think there is no discussion about that.

Nobody wants transparency in his private life. You would not want that everybody could read on the internet what your finances were and who you slept with yesterday. I think we can all agree on that.

Now comes the difficult part, which is business. With business, there the question of transparency is much more difficult because, on the one hand, business, and depending on the scale of business, is partly public life and public administration. There is no doubt that, if you have a very big company, a multi-national, it has an impact on how society is behaving and, therefore, you could think transparency might be a good thing.

On the other hand, there are a certain number of issues with transparency and business because you have the business secrets, like production secrets, like defence secrets, like patents and so forth. You don't want everything to be publicly available.

### **Are there any immediate issues you will be pursuing?**

I understand that the government is working on a piece of legislation on whistle-blowing very actively, and it might be that that might be progressing in the very short term.

### **How do you think Luxembourg is doing tackling the three different types of corruption you outlined?**

I think there has been progress made. There have been pieces of legislation brought in, there have been codes of ethics brought in, there have been advances in law enforcement, there is a bigger awareness of the issues – not only at the government level but at some business levels – and all of that is important and going in the right direction.

But that doesn't mean the work is done – I don't see any society that does not have issues with corruption-related offences. Corruption is, like they say for other offences, an offence that is as old as humanity. It will die with humanity, but only then.