

Inside Development

Transparency and Accountability

## Exclusive: Inquiry after EU 'bans' sales of Guinea-Bissau study

Research center accuses the European Union of "bullying" and "silencing voices" in one of Africa's lowest-income countries — where the EU ambassador received a prestigious presidential award.

By **Rob Merrick** // 12 August 2024



Daily life in a northern Guinea-Bissau town in November 2015. Photo by: Alamy

The [European Commission](#) is under investigation after suppressing a groundbreaking study to promote democracy and human rights in Guinea-Bissau, allegedly to curry favor with the West African country's authoritarian leader.

A highly unusual inquiry has been launched by the European Ombudsman following a protest from a Paraguay-based [research center](#), which was paid by Brussels to produce the academic work — only for the commission to then prevent it being sold, severely curtailing its publication and availability.

Nearly 500 scholars, journalists, and civic leaders from 45 countries

have signed a petition attacking “infringements of academic freedom” and demanding the EU “lift all restrictions” imposed on the book titled “Voices of the People.”

Now the ombudsman has set a deadline of mid-September for the commission, the [European Union](#)’s executive body, to explain its actions, after starting an inquiry despite normally rejecting complaints from non-EU organizations.

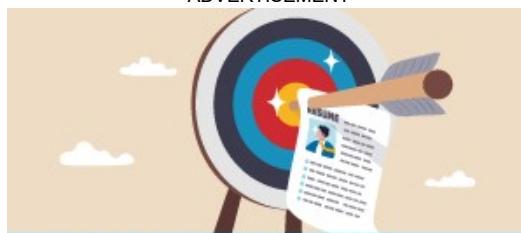
A letter sent to the secretariat-general responsible for ethics and good administration posed the commission a series of questions, including asking why it would not “allow a potential academic publisher to sell copies of the published study.”

The research center DEMOS — Center for Democracy, Creativity and Social Inclusion — in Paraguay has linked the commission’s “censorship” of its work to an award given to the outgoing EU ambassador to Guinea-Bissau by its President Umaro Sissoco Embaló — who has twice [dissolved Parliament](#), prompting accusations that he breached the constitution.

Miguel Carter, director of DEMOS, told Devex: “The EU has behaved like a giant bully. We signed a contract that guaranteed publication, and every lawyer we have seen has said we have a right to publish, but the EU has trampled all over us and banned sales.

“We listened to people in one of Africa’s poorest countries to defend and advance democracy, yet an organization that claims to stand for democracy and freedom has silenced those voices – voices that told us they wanted to be heard.”

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DEMOS said the “Voices of the People” initiative — which it believes is the first extensive public opinion study carried out in an African country — identified “widespread mistrust” of government in Guinea-Bissau.

“We found people were very distressed with their country, with their poverty and their country’s lack of development, and they see bad governance as the main cause of that,” Carter explained.

However, he stressed it was not a critique of Embaló’s administration — having been carried out in 2018, before he came to power — and that members of the nation’s Parliament were “excited” by the project, which they believed to be of value to Guinea-Bissau.

Dozens of researchers gathered information over a period of three and a half years. Ten scholars, including experts on West Africa, then collaborated on the book, which was written in Portuguese and translated into English.

Then, just before the Portuguese edition was to be printed in November 2021, the commission blocked publication — despite Simona Schleder, the EU’s head of development cooperation in Guinea-Bissau, praising the study as “fantastic.” No explanation was given.

The research center asked to be transferred the copyright, but the suggestion was rejected. In October 2022, it delivered its own copies to the commission’s headquarters in Brussels stamped with “CENSORED by the European Union.”

A few weeks later, the commission authorized publication but not sales of the book, which, DEMOS said, effectively prevented its release because no publisher would pay to produce and distribute a book it could not sell.

Today, the work is available in digital form in Portuguese, but only 300 physical copies have been made — “they are sitting in my house in Paraguay,” Carter said — prompting the complaint to the ombudsman claiming infringement of academic freedom and human rights.

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In its response, seen by Devex, Rosita Hickey, the director of inquiries

for EU Ombudsman Emily O’Reilly, told DEMOS that organizations outside the EU are “not authorised to lodge a complaint with my office.”

Nevertheless, Hickey said the watchdog had decided “to carry out an inquiry on the European Ombudsman’s own initiative,” adding: “This occurs when her intervention could serve the public interest and ensure good administration.”

The head of the ethics and good administration unit in the secretariat-general, Christian Linder, has been asked to arrange for “the relevant representatives of the Commission” to answer questions before Sept. 16.

Carter said he hopes the inquiry will finally enable widespread publication of Voices of the People, as well as “repair the damage” DEMOS has suffered and prompt the EU to overhaul its practices to “safeguard academic freedom” in future.

In Guinea-Bissau, Embaló dissolved Parliament in May 2022, and again in December 2023 — after what Embalo [described as an attempted coup](#) — a move condemned as unconstitutional by the Parliament’s president. Parliamentary elections are now [scheduled for November](#).

In August 2022, the president awarded the outgoing EU Ambassador Sónia Neto with the prestigious National Order of the Boé Hills medal, praising her for having “contributed greatly to the deepening of cooperation ties between the European Union and Guinea-Bissau.”

The European Commission told Devex it “doesn’t comment on ongoing inquiries.” Devex has attempted to contact Neto, who is not thought to currently work for the EU.

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## About the author



### Rob Merrick

Rob Merrick is the U.K. Correspondent for Devex, covering FCDO and British aid. He reported on all the key events in British politics of the past 25 years from Westminster, including the financial crash, the Brexit fallout, the “Partygate” scandal, and the departures of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss. Rob has worked for The Independent and the Press Association and is a regular commentator on TV and radio. He can be reached at [rob.merrick@devex.com](mailto:rob.merrick@devex.com).