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Your excellency, there was an announcement that the European Parliament can take the decision on the date for Bulgaria's accession to the EU before the European Commission's monitoring report in May. Is this possible and what would be the significance of such a decision?

The decision about a possible delay has to be taken by the member-states after a proposal of the European Commission. Of course, the European parliament is very closely involved in all this process and my commissioner has promised to inform the Parliament and to involve it in all this monitoring process. That is why my commissioner Mr. Olli Rehn will go in front of the Parliament next week to discuss the issues of the process of accession of Bulgaria and Romania. So the European parliament is closely involved in this process, the decision of a possible use of the safeguard clause could be taken by the member-states after proposal of the European Commission. But of course the opinion of the European parliament is extremely important for us, for the Commission.

I would like to ask a question on the pre-accession programs and the requirements for companies who would like to apply for participation in these. In part of the Bulgarian administration, and also in society, it is believed sometimes that the Delegation is setting the rules, the requirements, for participation. In the new 10 member-states the conditions are not so severe as those in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian vs. the European enterprises, their chances... Who is setting the requirements for participation in the pre-accession programs?

There is no general requirement that applies to all tenders. Each tender, depending on its amount, complexity and nature, requires different conditions for participation. It is the decision of the Bulgarian authorities, that are preparing the tender dossier, and this tender dossier is then discussed with us and approved, or not approved, by us. I have heard polar criticisms – sometimes, that we have too high standards for participation; and the opposite – that sometimes our standards are too low. This makes me believe that we are perhaps in the right middle. No, it is not an easy decision, but we want to have companies with experience, so that we can expect for them to be able to implement the projects, or to execute the works, or to provide the services. That is why sometimes we have to put the conditions quite high, but I do not agree with the criticisms that the Delegation is putting the conditions very high. Anyway, after the accession, it will be only the Bulgarian authorities, without any control from the Delegation, that will have to manage the EU funds, and then they can decide on their own. For the time being, we are still under the system of ex ante control, as we call it, which means that every decision of

the tendering procedure is taken by the Bulgarians but has to be approved by the Delegation of the European Commission.

And are those conditions easily met by the Bulgarian enterprises or not?

I know a lot of Bulgarian firms that are participating in our tenders. There are a number of Bulgarian firms that are successful in winning the tenders. So I do not see that this point of criticism is sound. Of course, when we are speaking of very big projects, like the Danube Bridge or other complex projects, the Bulgarian companies have always the possibility – if they do not fulfill themselves the requirements – in terms of turnover or previous experience – to form consortia with other companies. We have an increasing number of Bulgarian companies participating in our tenders, and also successfully participating in these tenders.

We know that at the moment a procedure is under way for choosing a consultant for the management of the grant scheme for NGOs. What measures have been taken by the Delegation in order to provide transparency and to avoid possible criticisms about lack of objectivity?

To avoid criticisms is not easy; it is not always possible. We always follow the prag-rules (the practical guide rules) – the rules applicable to all funds coming from the EU and the pre-accession funds for Bulgaria. We always follow these rules; they are applicable not only for Bulgaria but in all candidate-countries, also all over the world where the EU is providing assistance. These rules are the result of decades of experience of the EU in managing foreign aids and they guarantee full transparency of the procedures. Now, on your concrete request – I never comment and never say anything on ongoing tendering procedures.

You were mentioning the period after accession, when the Delegation will not exist any more, as we know, only up to 15 months is possible as delay, for the structures managing projects from the pre-accession funds only. Do you think that Bulgaria has an administration that is prepared to take the role and practically replace the high expertise of the Delegation?

I think that the state of preparation of the Bulgarian administration is improving every year and every month. This is beyond any doubt. But on the other side, the amount, the complexity of the projects that your country will have to manage after accession, is much higher than the ones that they have to manage today. So there is always a need to further improve the administrative capacity, because after accession the funds that will be available for your country will be much higher than the ones available today. This requires an even further improvement of the administrative capacity of the Bulgarian administration.

After the Delegation will not exist any more, what will be the professional careers of the Bulgarian staff working for it now?

The Delegation will be transformed into a representation office as these that we have in all member-states. The number of the people employed in this representation office will be much lower than the one that we have now, precisely because the Delegation, or Representation, will not any more have any competences in the management of the EU funds. This will be the sole and unique responsibility of the Bulgarian authorities. Thus, the need to review our human resources. We have been very proud to have excellent collaborators, both Bulgarians and non-Bulgarian Europeans. And I am sure that, given their professional capacities and experience, I am speaking precisely about the Bulgarian colleagues, some of them might find an employment opportunity in the Representation office; some others might choose to go to Brussels to work for European institutions (after and if they can succeed the very transparent exams that will be organized in the next few months). So I think that overall the people

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working for the Delegation will have – perhaps some of them – will have an even better opportunity to develop their career within the European institutions.

For the last years, an administrative reform is under way in Bulgaria, aiming at creating a professional administration, as well as a clear distinction between the political level from the professional level of civil servants. Do you think that the model existing now is reasonable and is it necessary to increase the opportunities for political appointments?

There is always a very difficult balance between the political and the civil servant level of the administration. Different countries have chosen different models. I do not feel expert in this areas to give advice. What I can tell you is that we are very glad that the administrative reform is advancing; I think that very important steps have been taken in the last years. It is important not only in the view of the accession of Bulgaria, but also – more generally – for the social and economic development of your country. In today's world, you cannot afford not to have a competent and efficient administration, as it is a precondition for economic development. So I am very glad that very positive steps have been taken during the last years for modernizing the Bulgarian administration. It has all started with the adoption of the Law of state administration. We are very glad that we, the European Union, have participated in this effort.

I remember of a scandal last year about the lack of transparency in the objectivity of choice for funding of civil organizations by the EU. This debate never really ended, I mean no sound conclusions were made. Do you think that this discussion should be revived?

I have not seen any scandal. I have seen only some unfounded accusations, which most probably were due to the lack of information about our procedures. So, from our part, we do not have any reason to continue this debate. It was totally unfounded.

In your judgment, are the NGOs themselves sufficiently satisfied with the conclusions after this debate last year?

I do not know this, I haven't heard anything since then, so I cannot give you a reply on that. As I told you, the rules are there, these rules are applicable not only here but also all over the world. We are not going to make any exception for Bulgaria. We are playing under the same rules, which are the result of a long experience of our institutions. If there is any problem, we are ready to discuss with anybody who feels that his or her interest have not been taken into account. We also have a very transparent system of complaints: I have not received any complaints so far on this, so I cannot comment on theoretical scandals.

What is your biggest concern, today, about the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union?

We are now a few weeks before the adoption of the monitoring report by the European Commission. This is a decision of the 25 commissioners in Brussels, which will be taken after the proposal of Olli Rehn. We, as Delegation – as a Commission services – are trying to prepare the report in the most objective, impartial and professional way. For the time being, my concern is to try to contribute to this exercise, which has been recognized as having been objective and professional in the previous years. I think it will be a very big success for us, as Commission, that also this report will really be objective. On the basis of this report, then it is up to the political level to take the decisions about the next steps in Bulgaria's accession. I have no concerns about all this. I think that the rules of the game are very clear, they are known, they are in the treaty. We are a community based on the rule of law. We, as European Union, are going to respect our promises and commitments, and we expect Bulgaria to do the same.