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Safeguard clauses would not mean that the Bulgarian government is not active enough, EU socialists believe

Parliamentary Group of the Party of European Socialists vice-president in charge of EU enlargement issues, Jan Marinus Wiersma of the Netherlands, in an interview for Portal EUROPE.

***I do not believe Romania is ahead of Bulgaria; they are at the same level right now.**

***Tuesday the Socialist monitoring team visits Romania.**

***Wednesday afternoon is the first debate on Bulgaria and Romania on a plenary session in Brussels.**

Mr. Wiersma, the high-level monitoring team of the Socialist Group visited Bulgaria for an independent monitoring on this country's progress towards accession. When will your report be ready?

We make these reports only for our group and for its Bureau. This report is not meant to be published. We will use this report in the debate within the Socialist Group in the weeks to come. This report will be a database for our assessment of the May monitoring report of Commissioner Olli Rehn. We agreed that we need to do an independent thorough assessment of Bulgaria and Romania, including some fact-finding of our own. That is why we did a monitoring trip to Bulgaria on March 30, and tomorrow (Tuesday April 25) we are traveling to Romania. The members of our monitoring group are experienced euro-parliamentarians. The internal monitoring is for internal use only. What we will publish will be our conclusions – but this will be done after May 16. The report concerning Bulgaria has already been disputed internally. Wednesday afternoon is scheduled the first debate on Bulgaria and Romania here in Brussels at a plenary session. On this debate, we will only raise some important questions to the attention of the European Commission. As to the Parliament's conclusion, this will not be drawn on April 26; for this we will have to wait until May 16, and after the respective reports of Mr. Moscovisi and Mr. Van Orden.

Is it true that the EP Socialist Group has not yet decided whether to support or not support the 2007 accession?

It all depends on Mr. Rehn's report. Our position is that we hope that both countries can enter the EU on January 1, 2007. That is our ambition. We also wish that the European Council should take its decision in June and not later. Of course, we cannot come to a final judgment before we have the report of Mr.

Rehn.

You were quoted as saying, before your March visit to Sofia, that, "We are not prepared to leave such an important matter to the European Commission alone". Does that suggest that you distrust the Commission?

No, not at all. Simply it would be fairer to Bulgaria and Romania that we also do our own fact-finding. We do all this just in order to have additional information. This is not out of distrust for Commissioner Rehn; this has two other purposes – first, for us – to be more prepared; and second – to show to Bulgaria and Romania that we take this very seriously. Our hope and intention is that there will be no postponement next year. We are a very big parliamentary group, which plays a vital role when it comes to decision taking about enlargement. My responsibility is to organize and prepare the debate within our group in such a way, that we could come to a united position. I was telling to my colleagues, that some fact-finding, done on our own, would tremendously contribute to that. This has nothing to do with distrust for Mr. Rehn – I think he is a very capable commissioner.

He is a conservative. In your judgment, can this be a reason for him to be more critical about the achievements of the Socialist government in Bulgaria?

I do not think so... Like the Socialist Group, the commissioner has also always been very objective. I don't think that his political affiliations play a role in this. He has been critical on both Romania and Bulgaria. In the past, we have also adopted a very critical approach towards candidate-countries in order to stimulate them to carry out the necessary reforms in time. I don't think that the party background plays a role here...

It seems that today Romania is ahead of Bulgaria in terms of meeting the requirements and membership criteria – Mr. Rehn's recent statements imply this. Is there a political explanation for the progress made by Romania?

I do not belong to those people who think that now Romania is ahead of Bulgaria. I don't believe this. The fact is that Romania has been working consistently now for the last few years, especially in the fight against corruption. There are a number of high-level cases that are being prosecuted in Bucharest. Yes, that is true. If you compare that with Bulgaria, you will see that your country lost time last year, because of the long time necessary to form the new government after the elections. I am quite sure that the Bulgarian government will be able to convince us until May that Bulgaria is ready... As far as I know there still are very active discussions going on between Bulgaria and the European commission. I would not say that Romania is ahead of Bulgaria; I would say that they are both at the same level right now.

Mr. Wiersma, you were quoted on the eve of your March visit to Sofia as saying that the accession decision should neither be political, nor dependent on the possible internal political consequences in our two countries. Having in mind the problems in Sofia and Bucharest, wouldn't a political decision be the only chance for a timely EU-accession?

We have to judge Bulgaria and Romania according to their own merits only, whether they are ready to integrate the EU in 2007. As agreed before, these are the criteria used by us. These criteria are in principle not political, they refer to the capability of both countries to be full members of the EU. I think that it will not be very good if we say – well, Bulgaria or Romania are not prepared, but for political reasons we declare them ready. This certainly is not a good approach.

Bulgarian President Parvanov and Prime Minister Stanishev – who both belong to the Socialist party – repeatedly state that a political decision will be taken and the membership is

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"guaranteed"...

Well, this is their responsibility, they could bring this element to the internal debate, but I cannot say here in Brussels to my colleagues, a country is not ready but of political reasons let's declare it ready... It does not work like that here.

The Government of European Integration of Bulgaria (as is named in its ruling program) has as basic promise – the "full membership in 2007). If safeguard clauses were activated, would that mean that the government does not keep its promise?

The most important thing for Bulgaria and Romania is to get the green light for January 1, 2007. In that case, there might be a number of safeguard clauses activated, but these will not be decided before the end of October. I think that, in any case, both countries will be given some time to finalize preparations, after the accession. In October or November, the Commission will decide whether safeguards are necessary. That is one. Secondly, I don't see what would make it different for Bulgaria and Romania if safeguards were activated. It is quite normal to have safeguards, also in the accession of the other countries. There have been a lot of transitional arrangements: I don't see why it would be a disgrace for Bulgaria and Romania to have some safeguard clauses, because it's not a new thing.

If safeguards were activated, who would have to be blamed – an inefficient Bulgarian government or a too demanding European Commission?

No, like I said safeguards have been introduced before in a number of issues. It has happened in the cases of other new member states. These arrangements are quite normal. These safeguards are there simply to give new member states some more time to prepare on specific issues. Safeguards are not the consequences of critical view from outside. They are not also seen as a consequence of the lack of activity from the government of a candidate-country. Basically, if the problems are too serious, there might be a debate about suspension. But if there are a number of problems that can be solved and are not so serious, then safeguard clauses are activated. The problems, which are not too serious, can be solved within 2 or 3 years and in that time the clauses will be active. This is not a shame.

Obviously there are problems with the progress made by Bulgaria. Whose fault is this? Of the government maybe?

In my experience – I have been a rapporteur of Slovakia for 7 years – there are always problems. What we demand the candidate-countries is enormous. In order to judge the achievements of a government of a candidate-country, there are the following two most important criteria: one, were they able to conclude the negotiations, secondly, are they able to get country in the EU adequately on time. On these two basic issues, both governments in Sofia and Bucharest have responded well. You cannot blame a government, if you have in mind what enormous task has to be accomplished for the preparations. The problems you are talking about are just a few things that will remain for after the accession; and there are safeguard clauses for these. In the end, the basic achievements have taken place – concluding the negotiations and having the membership on the agreed date.

Here, safeguards and a possible postponement are perceived as electoral problems for the Socialist-dominated government. The BSP are colleagues, comrades, of yours. Can Bulgarian Socialists rely on a political support by the European Socialists?

We support them by giving good advice and by showing interest like we do with the monitoring reports, in order to assist them to reach the finish. But don't forget that this is a coalition government. It is a combination of parties – they are not only socialists. The responsibility for having the job done is not

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only of the BSP. There are two things I don't want to speculate on: one is, that there will be a postponement: as far as I know, there will not be a postponement; and secondly, it is easy to blame this or that party for the hardship – it's not up to me to do it here from Brussels, it is up to the Bulgarian voters.

The BSP is member of the Socialist international. At your knowledge, was it necessary, in order to become member, for the BSP to use lobbyists?

If you want to become a member of the Socialist International, you need at least the support of the Administration Committee. And of course you have to present yourself to the parties, which are members of this Committee. Of course you need to have a lobby. You cannot become a member without being able to present yourself. So I think it is a normal procedure that if you want to become a member of the Socialist International, you have to convince the members that you are a good candidate. Whether to use lobbyists or not, in order to achieve that, depends on the leadership of the party that wants to become a member...

According to some information, Mr. Shimon Sheves as representative of the Israel Labor Party has supported candidature of the BSP for the Socialist International. Do you know Mr. Shimon Sheves?

No.

Does the Socialist Group in the EP have a position on the American military presence in countries like Bulgaria and Romania?

Not really, as these are sovereign countries. These are arranged by NATO documents and are not a responsibility of the European Union.

Bulgarian Prime Minister Stanishev said recently on television that the EU funds would be a compensation for the painful transition period, sort of financial compensation for the hardship. Do you think that this is the real aim of funding – to compensate?

There are many ways to express that. He is right of course. Once that Bulgaria becomes a member, as one of the poorest states in the EU, it will benefit from substantive funds – the social fund, the structural fund, the cohesion fund, etc. This will help a lot of people in Bulgaria. The EU membership is not only "reform, reform, reform", but also it is the participation in the budget of the EU. And this budget is organized in such a way, that the poorest regions get most of the subsidies. And I think is fair enough.

The head of the Delegation of the European Commission to Sofia Mr. Dimitris Kurkulas was quoted as telling a French parliamentarian, rapporteur for Bulgaria, that after the Accession Treaty was signed, the tempo of reforms decreased. Bulgarian European Affairs Minister Mrs. Kuneva says that if the membership is postponed, the reforms will stop. Do you think that the accession is the only stimulus for reforms in Bulgaria?

No, I hope not. I have always said that the reforms as such are good for the country and are done in the name of its people. The EU-membership is only one of the consequences of these reforms. In the end, you have to be doing the reforms for yourselves. And if you want to join the EU, you have to adapt yourselves to the rules of the club. These rules can be implemented only by reforming the existing mechanisms. It is in the general interest of the Bulgarian people to have a well-organized economy without corruption... On the other hand, I am aware that the attraction of the EU-membership has maybe speeded up the reforms tempo. With or without membership, these reforms are good for Bulgaria.

EP Socialist Group vice-president Jan Marinus Wiersma in an interview for Portal EUROPE.
