

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

INVITED COMMITTEE:
COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE

HEARING OF OLIVÉR VÁRHELYI

COMMISSIONER-DESIGNATE

(Neighbourhood and Enlargement)

THURSDAY, 14 NOVEMBER 2019

BRUSSELS

1-002-0000

IN THE CHAIR: DAVID McALLISTER*Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs**(The hearing opened at 8.08)*

Chair. – Good morning ladies and gentlemen, good morning dear colleagues, good morning dear guests. I would like to especially welcome a number of ambassadors. Your Excellencies, welcome to the Foreign Affairs Committee.

First of all, I would like to give you all a very warm welcome, and especially a warm welcome to Mr Olivér Várhelyi, the designate for the post of Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement.

Jó napot, Mr Várhelyi, in the Foreign Affairs Committee. We are happy to have you here today, because this will be a valuable opportunity for dialogue and the first important step towards a constructive and fruitful cooperation with the European Parliament. I have no doubt that you are committed to developing close links and effective interaction with us here in the European Parliament for the future.

Colleagues, I would like to remind you that the purpose of this hearing is for the parliament to evaluate the Commissioner-designate on the basis of his general competence, his European commitment and his personal independence.

This hearing also provides an opportunity to assess the Commissioner-designate's knowledge of his prospective portfolio and his communication skills.

On 13 November we received Mr Várhelyi's responses to our written questions. They have been distributed to Members in all languages and have also been published on our Parliament's website.

Please allow me now to briefly describe the structure of this hearing, which has been, of course, put in place under Parliament's Rules of Procedure in order to ensure an equal and fair opportunity for all Commissioners-designate to present themselves and their opinions.

Firstly, the Commissioner-designate will be invited to give an opening oral statement of no longer than 15 minutes. After his introduction, there will be time for 25 questions from the Members. In the first round we will have the questions put forward by the speakers of the political groups, and in the second round we will have the questions put forward by 18 Members according to the quotas allocated to the different political groups, including also representative from the non-attached Members.

These five-minute time slots of questions and answers are composed as follows: each Member has one minute time to ask her or his question. This is followed by a two-minute answer by the Commissioner-designate. Then, if needed, there's a possibility for the same Member to ask an immediate follow-up question of maximum one minute, and finally the Commissioner-designate can again give a one-minute answer to that follow-up question.

Let me remind colleagues that the follow-up question must relate to the Commissioner-designate's reply to the first question and shall not be used to raise other matters.

At the end of the hearing the Commissioner-designate will have five minutes for a closing statement. The total time of this hearing is strictly limited to three hours, therefore I would ask all colleagues to remain within the speaking time allocated to them. If colleagues speak for more of the time allocated to them, they will take speaking time away from other colleagues.

Interpretation is provided this morning into 23 languages. This hearing will be streamed live on Parliament's website, and it will also be possible to access a video recording of the hearing on the same site.

So that's all from my side as an introduction. Commissioner-designate, Mr Várhelyi, you now have the floor for your opening statement of up to 15 minutes. The floor is yours.

1-004-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – Chair, honourable Members, I am honoured to have the opportunity as Commissioner-designate for Neighbourhood and Enlargement to present to you today my vision for our future relationship with our neighbours and partners.

First, allow me a few words about myself that are relevant for better understanding my vision for the task ahead, if I am confirmed by this House.

I was born in Communist Hungary. Members of my family were victims of persecution after 1956, the revolution that was brutally crushed by the Soviet army and the Communist regime. This has formed my conscience ever since, from very early childhood. The fall of Communism opened the way for central and eastern European countries to rejoin free Europe. I belong to the young generation of Hungarians who made it a reality.

The 2004 enlargement was a dream come true for us. Ever since, I have been working on making it a success. I have served my country, and the European Union, in different positions. I have learned that the interests of Member States and the Union may diverge on certain issues but their ultimate goal is the same: building a strong and successful Europe for the benefit of all.

My guiding principle that I have always adhered to is synthesis. I aim to find common ground and links between the different positions, and create solutions that work for all. For example, when I served as a manager at the European Commission I was responsible for creating a European unitary patent. Hungary was among the fiercest opponents at first. However, I managed to highlight the benefit to them and to many others and we created the European unitary patent in the framework of the second successful enhanced cooperation in the EU.

Building Europe is not about choosing between national or European interests but about finding their synthesis and working for the common good. I intend to continue my work along this principle. As European Commissioner, if confirmed, I will be a bridge between the European Parliament, representing citizens directly, the Council, representing the Member States, and our neighbouring countries.

Our neighbourhood is of strategic importance for the EU. Our destiny is linked with and significantly influenced by the fate of our neighbours. There is a major development gap between the EU and its neighbours. My objective will be to reduce it by unleashing the untapped potential of the region.

During my mandate, I want to strengthen the EU's role in fostering security, stability, and promoting prosperity in a challenging and changing neighbourhood. I want to support sustainable economic development underpinned by a functioning market economy, strong

democratic institutions, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. We need to ensure that nobody is left behind, therefore. I want to help our partners to reinforce the social dimension of their economy in sync with their economic development. If we do not assume our responsibilities, others will take our place.

We have to recognise the different realities and circumstances our partners are faced with in our neighbourhood and support them with tailor-made solutions. The Western Balkans, including North Macedonia and Albania, have a clear EU accession perspective. Our job is to help them embrace the opportunities this offers which, in our eyes, our own very strategic interest. Other strategic partners, such as Turkey, are however clearly moving away from European values and norms. We need to reflect on how to deal with that more effectively.

Some partners have progress and reforms hindered directly by conflict like Syria in Libya or its fallout in Lebanon. Some countries in the east, Georgia, Ukraine, and more recently Moldova, and in the south, Morocco and Tunisia are showing determination, sometimes in very difficult contexts, to tackle reforms, others less so. Hence, intelligent differentiation across the portfolio remains key to exporting stability.

Honourable Members, allow me to make some specific remarks on each region, starting with the Western Balkans.

This region is an integral part of Europe and its accession perspective must be credible. This is in our geopolitical self-interest. But we need to sustain and accelerate progress more effectively through a merit-based process for each individual country. We need to focus on the real impact of the necessary reforms on the ground. We need to measure progress in increased prosperity and quality of life and freedom for the people in the region – the ultimate objective of the accession process.

I intend to increase the pace of structural and institutional reforms, with a strong focus on the fundamentals of the rule of law, economic development, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform.

I will engage with all institutions, businesses and civil society to accomplish this. I will continue to defend the proposal to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. I will do all to make it happen within the shortest time frame possible. Major European leaders went to North Macedonia before the referendum on the Prespa Agreement and promised that if it passed, accession negotiations would start.

Albania too has implemented significant reforms in the judiciary and in the administration, meeting our requests. In other words, what is at stake here is the EU's credibility in the region and beyond.

I will work also to better integrate the region into key EU policies even before accession. For example, to ensure the Western Balkans are closely associated to our Green Deal, our digital agenda and in terms of trans-European networks in transport or energy.

I will support all efforts towards good neighbourly relations, the resolution of bilateral disputes. I will work together with Josep Borrell to bring the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina to a successful conclusion in 2020.

The European Union must prepare to be ready to take on board future Member States once the conditions are met. But I do not see a binary choice between deepening and widening. In the history of our Union, the two have gone hand-in-hand.

I will also work as a team with Josep Borrell on our future relations with Turkey, a key partner for the EU in a wide range of fields. There is clear scope to get more out of our relations to better serve our mutual interests. As Turkey continues to play a vital role in hosting and addressing the needs of almost four million refugees, we should continue assisting Turkey in this and in managing increased irregular migration.

However, we cannot turn a blind eye to recent worrying events. In particular we need to address the negative developments in the rule of law and human rights, Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy, its provocative and illegal drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean and its recent military intervention in Syria, which further complicates a political solution to the conflict and diverts attention away from the fight against ISIS.

Accession negotiations have effectively come to a standstill. The next Commission should therefore start a reflection, in consultation with this House and together with the Council, on how to develop a strategic partnership, based on common interests and rooted in existing frameworks.

In our Eastern Neighbourhood, I want to see the Eastern Partnership strengthened in light of the ongoing consultations on its future. I will work on proposals for the Eastern Partnership's long-term policy objectives, to be presented by the Commission in good time ahead of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels in June 2020.

We already have far-reaching bilateral frameworks with a number of countries like Georgia, Moldova or Ukraine. Beyond ensuring the implementation of reforms on the ground, I want to work towards deepening sectoral cooperation with the countries that are ready.

Ukraine will always receive my special attention. It is of key geopolitical importance for the EU. We will continue to support its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, efforts to bring the conflict in Donbas to an end and to support reforms, whether on the rule of law or the economy. We should make full use of all our tools, including the Commission's Support Group for Ukraine.

Azerbaijan can be a key partner in the energy sector but we have to keep the rule of law and democracy on the agenda. With Armenia we need to focus on economic development, and with Belarus, help the country's modernisation while keeping the development of core democratic values on the agenda.

I will always continue working on key issues such as the rule of law, the fight against corruption and the role of an independent media in civil society.

En ce qui concerne notre voisinage avec le Sud, nos principaux défis demeurent la stabilité, la sécurité, la prospérité et la migration. Nos objectifs doivent être réalistes, mais également beaucoup plus ambitieux en ce qui concerne le développement économique dans la région. Grâce au principe de «Plus pour Plus» nous encourageons nos pays partenaires à atteindre leurs objectifs de réformes.

Je m'attacherai en priorité à promouvoir, à leurs côtés, la bonne gouvernance, la protection de l'environnement et du climat ainsi qu'une approche plus efficace des questions migratoires.

J'accorderai une importance absolue à la croissance économique et à la réussite des politiques d'emploi, en particulier vis-à-vis des jeunes.

Pour réussir, nous devons mettre à jour nos priorités, en prenant en compte les besoins et les intérêts propres à chacun de nos partenaires. Le Maroc, par exemple, est dans une dynamique de modernisation très prometteuse. Nous devons le soutenir, tout comme la Tunisie et la Jordanie. En coopération étroite avec Josep Borrell, j'ai l'intention de formuler rapidement de nouvelles propositions concernant les priorités des partenariats afin d'intensifier nos relations avec ces pays qui sont engagés dans des réformes exigeantes.

Les relations avec la Libye et la Syrie sont plus complexes. Le premier de mes objectifs sera de travailler à rétablir et à protéger la paix et la stabilité, en coordination avec les Nations unies.

La stabilité de l'Égypte est également essentielle pour l'ensemble de la région. Nous continuerons à soutenir les réformes économiques et politiques. En même temps, nous poursuivrons notre dialogue étroit en matière de droits de l'homme.

Nous allons travailler sans relâche, enfin, à un partenariat sur la migration avec nos partenaires du Sud. Nous utiliserons tous les instruments à notre disposition pour atteindre nos objectifs. Nous mettrons principalement l'accent sur la lutte contre le chômage des jeunes. Nous lutterons également contre la migration irrégulière, la traite des êtres humains et le trafic illicite de migrants. Cela doit aussi inclure le soutien au contrôle des frontières ainsi que des mécanismes de réadmission et de retour qui fonctionnent. Une meilleure promotion de la mobilité et des programmes de migration légale nous sera également mutuellement bénéfique.

Nous devons soutenir le Liban et la Jordanie, deux pays qui accueillent un nombre très important de réfugiés. Nous devons, enfin, soutenir les retours volontaires en Syrie, si les principes fondamentaux liés au retour volontaire, sûr et digne des réfugiés sont respectés, en étroite coordination avec le Haut-Commissariat aux réfugiés des Nations unies.

Honourable Members, to help support the EU's policy objectives in the regions bordering the EU, let me summarise our four key deliverables for the next years.

First, we need to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. This means fully standing by a clear accession perspective and the principle of 'own merit'. At the same time, we need a more effective negotiation process and refocusing preparations to accelerate tangible results for people in their daily lives. This means enhancing our support for reforms, substantially increasing our financial and investment support, with the aim of improving the economy, trade, education and travel conditions.

Second, we will help the Eastern partner countries implement structural reforms and strengthen their economy, stability and security. We will continue to stand by the territorial integrity of Ukraine and strengthen its resilience.

Third, we will renew our partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood based on the 'more for more' principle while focusing on the economic development of our partners.

Fourth, we will make full use of the neighbourhood development and international cooperation instrument and the instrument for pre-accession, increasing the focus on investments. We will also strengthen cooperation with the international financial institutions to support structural reforms.

Chair, honourable Members, if confirmed as Commissioner, I will seek ongoing and close cooperation with this House, working closely with this Committee and other relevant committees. Direct engagement between the European Parliament and our partner countries is key, and I am determined to rely fully on parliamentary diplomacy.

We need to speak with one voice based on commonly agreed messages.

I will make myself available for regular discussions on the state of play of our work. I sincerely hope that this hearing will mark the beginning of an open and fruitful partnership.

1-007-0000

Željana Zovko (PPE). – Our continent has become more peaceful and prosperous with the enlargement of the European Union and the EU engagement with neighbouring countries, but on the other hand, the progress of the Western Balkan countries towards EU accession is impeded by ethnic tensions and animosity between the States. It is up to each country to make political and economic reforms and it is in our interest to support the countries of the Western Balkans in their path to EU membership and fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria.

With this in mind, how can we accelerate the integration of Western Balkan countries, in particular in the challenging areas of reconciliation, justice, rule of law and fundamental rights, and regional cooperation in an area in which much remains to be done, taking into account the historical events in the region, which also stand in the way of reconciliation. What concrete measures will you undertake to promote regional cooperation in the Western Balkans? Thank you.

1-008-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – First of all, what I would like to underline very clearly, is that even though we had, I would say, a hiccup in the October European Council, no one, and I was there, no one ever questioned even at that debate, the very strong commitment of the European Union for membership of the Western Balkan countries. The European perspective is unchanged and I will fight and work for that all the way.

Of course, we also need to take into account that we need to reinforce our work, because there were concerns raised, and those concerns will have to be heard and those concerns will have to be addressed, and I'm willing and able, capable, to work with those Member States who had concerns, and I will engage right away with those Member States to address them.

In those concerns, the rule of law was key; be it the independence of the judiciary, be it corruption — we have to intensify our work with our Western neighbours. On the other the hand, it is our task to deliver our commitment, which is to make it a reality that they can join the European Union, and what I see is that one of the biggest challenges is the very large gap in terms of economic development between them and us, and I will do my utmost during this five years, if confirmed by this House, to try and close that gap and bring economic prosperity and development to these countries.

It goes without saying that the market economy does not work or function without the rule of law. The two go hand in hand. On regional cooperation, I will see to it that they will engage with one another in a more meaningful way because, otherwise, they will never be able to play their role in the European Union.

1-009-0000

Željana Zovko (PPE). – I think that the situation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a complex one, and that this country is over-exposed to non-EU actors. What is your view on the recently-

increased attention of the United States to the Western Balkans and of the appointment of the special envoys to the region?

How should the European Union respond to this situation in order to foster an equidistant approach to this country and the region, in order to impose permanent peace and stability, and how do you see the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular, and what are the lessons learned from the past?

1-010-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – The key in relation to Bosnia and Herzegovina is to engage in the implementation of the 14 points that the Commission has analysed and came up with as priority areas for reform in the country.

We need to work with Bosnia-Herzegovina to get a government. They have been missing a government for over a year now, and they cannot become a candidate country unless they deliver on the reforms. I will see to it that we have everything put at their hands, so that they can comply with that.

On US engagement, I welcome that, and I would also want to reach out to the US special envoys and work with them, together, on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

1-011-0000

Tonino Picula (S&D). – European Commissioners are executive representatives of the European Union and they have to stand up for our common values. During your tenure as a permanent representative of Hungary to the European Union, you were the one who had to present and defend in the European Council the reforms introduced by the Hungarian government. A number of adopted Hungarian laws were in clear breach of the Treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Copenhagen criteria. As a result, the Article 7 procedure of the Treaty of European Union, voted by this very House, was launched against Hungary. As the Commissioner for enlargement, how would you ensure that in the candidate countries the rule of law, one of the cornerstones of the Copenhagen criteria and the value of the European Union, is implemented when Hungarian policies you were representing, in many cases, advocated the opposite?

1-012-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – As a Commissioner, my task is going to be to represent the European Union and this is what I am going to do. As you have seen in my previous engagements, I have already been working in a very independent way from any government instructions as a European civil servant. I intend to do the same and deliver the same approach in my working as European Commissioner by following the European Union line and only the European Union line.

When it comes to the rule of law in the Western Balkans, we have very clear criteria that they have to meet and I do not intend to change or propose any change to those criteria. On the contrary, as I have explained to the previous question, I think that we need to intensify work with our Western Balkan neighbours to achieve more because that was one of the reasons for which three Member States raised major concerns over the last year. I will work on these areas as a priority with those countries and with the Member States concerned.

1-013-0000

Tonino Picula (S&D). – What concrete steps would you take if any enlargement country adopts measures that are not in line or compatible with the key values and principles of the European Union, notably with regard to democracy, rule of law, including the independence of the judiciary, and the fight against corruption?

In your written answer to the second question, you stated that you attach great importance to equal treatment of Parliament and the Council in the context of financial instruments. As an EPA core rapporteur, I would like to know, do you undertake to support the EPA-free democratic conditionality clause enabling the suspension of assistance, and second do you commit to support the position that the delegated acts should be used both for the update of all EPA-free annexes and the adoption of strategic programming documents?

1-014-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – Our principle in the Western Balkans, and the principle represented by the EU has always been ‘fundamentals first’ and this is what I will pursue. It means that as long as there is no progress on the rule of law, there can be no real progress in accession. Therefore, I’m willing to use all tools available to ensure that the rule of law conditionality is met by our partners. If this would not be the case, then I will have to take a step-by-step approach which could even lead to the suspension of funding.

When it comes to the financial regulations in the making of the next MFF, of course this is a debate that we are going to have in the future. My principle in relation to that, is that we want to have financial instruments that are available, that are pragmatic, that are effective, and which are flexible. Of course, the governance needs to be looked at, and I will make sure that the views of the European Parliament will be taken into account.

1-015-0000

Ilhan Kyuchyuk (Renew). – Welcome, Mr Commissioner-designate, to our Committee meeting this morning. I think you rightly started with drawing a bigger picture for the EU’s global role. But after the failure of the European Council to start negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, I don’t see any picture for the Western Balkans. Five years ago Mr Jean-Claude Juncker stated, I think in Strasbourg, that for the next five years there will be no enlargement. I think it was a big mistake, but let’s say it’s already in the past. Parliament is convinced about enlarging the European Union. The same goes for the Commission. The problem is the Council. How are you going to convince the Council?

The second question goes to the big dilemma between deepening and enlarging. What is your position regarding the goal of the EU to reform itself internally first – you touched upon the issue a bit – and rethink the entire accession process before starting accession talks with other countries? And finally, if we proceed with the reform of the accession process under what conditions should it happen?

1-016-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – First, on the prospects for the Western Balkans, I would like to underline that even if we didn’t manage to open negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in October at the European Council, there is full commitment, also by the Council, for a European perspective for these countries. My work is going to be to alleviate all the existing problems that we have seen in the Council debate. I will reach out to those Member States which had concerns and I will engage in a very meaningful way from the first day in my office, if confirmed by this House, and look into the concerns they have had.

I think that we have two avenues to work on. First is to ensure that North Macedonia and Albania will have accession negotiations opened before the Zagreb Summit. We have to work on the concerns that are mainly related to asylum, fake asylum claims that are related to corruption and other parts of the rule of law. I will engage with our partners in Albania and North Macedonia to mitigate these concerns and meet the criteria that they are requested to meet.

When it comes to this new Commission, I think that there was a very clear message from the President-elect about the European perspective and the need to strengthen the European perspective for these countries.

In relation to your question on deepening and enlargement, as I said, I do not think that these are mutually exclusive. We need to work ourselves on making the EU more effective and stronger but it does not hinder us to go ahead with enlargement.

1-017-0000

Ilhan Kyuchyuk (Renew). – I have a short follow-up question regarding the framework, because I think if you want to be efficient, we have to have a framework. What time-frame do you see for a possible revision of the accession process until this new methodology enters into force?

1-018-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – I don't think that the whole enlargement framework would need to be completely revised. What I think is that the methodology will need to be enhanced. The methodology would need to be enhanced in a way that creates more dynamism, the possibility for more dynamism for those candidate countries who can and who wish to move faster. On the other hand, for those which are going slower, we will have to slow down also the enlargement process. We have seen that there are general conditions, the fundamental conditions that need addressing prior to any other areas. I think that we have to be very clear about this, that this will stay the same.

1-019-0000

Ernest Urtasun (Verts/ALE). – You have been a loyal proponent of Mr Orbán's priorities in Brussels, and at the same time Prime Minister Orbán looks on this portfolio as if it was his national property. This was very clearly shown in his statement at the 7th Summit of the Turkic Council, where he not only promised close cooperation with Azerbaijan and Turkey if his government succeeded in getting that portfolio, but also stated that he will be happy to be at their disposal to help them with their aspirations.

Commissioner-designate, we have a problem of loyalty here. You need to show us that you will be loyal to the European institutions and to European policies, and this is really worrying. So I want to give you now the possibility to show that loyalty by really standing up against that statement. It is very difficult to trust your loyalty to the European institutions and to the European project if you don't stand up against such a worrisome statement.

So are you ready to stand up against what Mr Orbán said?

1-020-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – As a Commissioner, from the day I am elected, I would be acting in a completely independent way. I would take no instructions from any government, any institution. I would be a Member of the next College, and I would act in a collegial way and I would be pursuing the EU line and only the EU line.

1-021-0000

Ernest Urtasun (Verts/ALE). – Well, as you can imagine, that is not enough for us. Those are very nice words, but we are here in the middle of a case where a national capital is directly intervening in your portfolio, telling you what you have to do. And this is totally unacceptable for a Commissioner, and this should be really worrying for you. You should really stand up against that, because otherwise you are not showing that you will be loyal to the European institutions.

You cannot react to that with very nice words; you need to react to a capital which is directly intervening in your portfolio. Are you ready to do that now in this particular case – yes or no?

1-022-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – As a Commissioner, I will not accept any interference with my portfolio or my task from any government.

1-023-0000

Anna Bonfrisco (ID). – Benvenuto Commissario designato. Parlo in italiano perché vorrei approfondire con lei il tema del Mediterraneo. Lei prima ha citato alcuni paesi fondamentali, ma la domanda è: secondo lei, quale ruolo esattamente dovrebbe svolgere l'Unione europea in quei paesi della sponda sud del Mediterraneo per promuovere, ma anche per ottenere, una reale stabilità politica, democratica, economica, di sicurezza, che consenta a noi di guardare con ottimismo a un processo di dialogo?

1-024-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – In the southern neighbourhood – I take the case of Morocco as an example. Morocco is willing to engage with us, not only in areas that are of interest to him or to it, but also that are of interest to us, and therefore we can continue and develop this partnership further with them. They cooperate with us on migration, which I find extremely important for our interest, so we should engage more when it comes to economic development, foreign direct investment or even trade. This could be a model for the entire southern neighbourhood. I see great potential also in relation to Tunisia once we have a new government in place. We have a new President Saied, who could be our partner in such an endeavour. With this, we could raise the possibility for the people of these countries to find jobs and a real life, a meaningful life in their home countries. This should also mean improving the education system, improving state administration. We can contribute very much to this region, but they would also have to cooperate with us on areas that are of the highest interest for us.

1-025-0000

Anna Bonfrisco (ID). – Quindi quali sono le priorità – oltre ai paesi che lei ha citato, e condivido la sua opinione – che l'Unione europea dovrebbe affrontare in Libia, per esempio, o in Libano, o anche nella stessa Unione per il Mediterraneo, per rilanciare l'azione dell'Unione europea che finora non ha portato a grandi risultati?

1-026-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – In Libya we are facing two problems. The first is a humanitarian one where the EU can help and should help and we need to intensify our efforts to improve the humanitarian conditions for migrants, to help the government to ensure conditions that are up to our standards when it comes to refugees. On the other hand, the country is in civil war. The country needs to be stabilised, but here the EU cannot act alone. We need our global partners to help us to stabilise the country. The Berlin process is very important and we need full engagement also from the United States to help us to bring peace to that country.

In relation to Lebanon, Lebanon is hosting one of the largest number of refugees and we have been already engaging with them, but we have to intensify there again our efforts to help them to cater for all these refugees. On the other hand, of course, the economic development potential is there in Lebanon. However, the security situation would still need to be stabilised in that country.

1-027-0000

Anna Fotyga (ECR). – Statements by Mr Jean-Claude Juncker five years ago about enlargement, as well as recent Council decisions concerning North Macedonia and Albania, have had an enormous impact on the countries of the Thessaloniki process, and also on Eastern Partnership countries. In time, preceding the Eastern Partnership countries, we have to find a way to reinvigorate their engagement with the EU, taking into account differentiations between them, naturally. In particular, we have to reinvigorate the relationship with the associated countries – Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and others as well. What are your plans for this summit?

1-028-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – We are in the making of a review of the Eastern Partnership. Currently consultations have just been concluded by the Commission colleagues and the Commission will now reflect on what to propose for the future in the Eastern Partnership. My idea about reinvigorating or reinforcing the Eastern Partnership would be to try to help them to create a market economy that will improve their chances of withstanding outside pressure but also to create a climate for investment, which will be for the prosperity of their nations.

As regards those eastern partner countries who have DCFTAs, I think that if they are willing to engage with us more, we should be ready to engage and integrate them into as many policy areas as they feel able to do.

On the other hand, I also have to underline that the DCFTAs are still to be implemented. With those agreements, these countries have undertaken to implement almost 70% of all European Union legislation. We will have to help them to arrive there.

So there is still work to be done to deliver on all the benefits of the DCFTAs, but should they like to engage with us more, be it economic development, be it basic infrastructure, such as transport or energy, or be it the Green Deal or digital, we should be able to engage in a more meaningful way with them on those areas.

1-029-0000

Anna Fotyga (ECR). – There is security scope for cooperation with Eastern Partnership countries as well. Some of them, like Belarus, are very questionable in this respect, maintaining exercises that are targeted against us. But countries like Ukraine simply fight the external aggression and, to some extent, they fight for all of us. The association countries have framework agreements with the EU as well as, in the case of Ukraine, for example, an administrative agreement with the EDA. What is your reflection on deepening security cooperation?

1-030-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – As I said, if they would like to engage more with us, it could also be with security. We should be able to do that. As regards Ukraine, we have a very special responsibility for that country. We need to help them to regain their sovereignty over the entire territory of Ukraine and we will have to stand by them and we will have to defend them, including any possible prolongation of the sanctions in relation to Russia, for as long as we do not see any progress in the Minsk process.

Of course I will help Josep Borrell with all the tools in my portfolio to make that happen, and meanwhile back up all the actions to help Ukraine regain its sovereignty.

1-031-0000

Γιώργος Γεωργίου (GUE/NGL). – Κύριε υποψήφιε Επίτροπε, ενώ μιλάτε για την ανάγκη οικοδόμησης ενός κράτους δικαίου στα Δυτικά Βαλκάνια, η χώρα σας, ο πρωθυπουργός σας αλλά και εσείς ως μόνιμος αντιπρόσωπος της Ουγγαρίας στην Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση εγκαλείστε, και μέσα από την ενεργοποίηση του άρθρου 7 της Συνθήκης της Λισαβόνας, είστε υπόλογοι για την υπόσκαψη κάποιων θεμελιωδών αρχών της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης. Ερώτηση: τελικά θα είστε ένας διχασμένος επίτροπος και θα πατάτε σε δυο βάρκες; Η μια θα είναι η ψυχή σας και αυτό που πραγματικά πιστεύετε και η άλλη θα είναι η ανάγκη να εξυπηρετήσετε τη θέση στην οποία θα διοριστείτε - αν διοριστείτε;

1-032-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – As Commissioner I will pursue the European Union position when it comes to the rule of law – be it the Western Balkans, be it the Eastern Partnership, be it the Southern neighbourhood. I will continue to defend that line in a very independent way,

unhindered by any external influence and acting in a collegial way with my colleagues in the College.

1-033-0000

Γιώργος Γεωργίου (GUE/NGL). – Είπατε ότι η Τουρκία είναι ένας σημαντικός εταίρος για την Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση, την ίδια στιγμή όμως παραδέχεστε ότι παραβιάζει τις αρχές του Διεθνούς Δικαίου και δεν πρέπει να κάνουμε τα στραβά μάτια. Ο κύριος Οτβάν όταν επικρότησε την εισβολή της Τουρκίας στη Συρία έκανε τα στραβά μάτια; Αυτή τη δήλωση εσείς την απορρίπτετε ως δήλωση η οποία έπρεπε να γίνει γιατί δεν έπρεπε να έρθουν πρόσφυγες στην Ευρώπη; Αυτή είναι μια αντίληψη που θα βοηθήσει για την πολιτική της διεύρυνσης και για την οικοδόμηση κράτους δικαίου και για τις χώρες οι οποίες είναι υπό ένταξη;

1-034-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – In relation to Turkey, we have a very clear line on what needs to be done when it comes to the rule of law. However, we have seen backtracking on that, and this is one of the main reasons why accession negotiations are at a standstill. We will have to have a full reflection on our future relationship with Turkey. We have our interests when it comes to the Customs Union and migration, but we also have our concerns. This House and the Council will have to have a full discussion about what future relations we should have with Turkey.

When it comes to illegal drilling activities around Cyprus, the Foreign Ministers have been very clear in introducing the possibility of restrictive measures. Should that be necessary, they should be used.

1-035-0000

Andrius Kubilius (PPE). – Commissioner-designate, the Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, declared that the new Commission will be a geopolitical Commission. In your statement also you stressed that Ukraine is of key geopolitical importance for you. I agree with you that on our European continent geopolitics is concentrated in the Eastern neighbourhood region, and here the situation of geopolitics is very clear. Three countries – Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova – want to integrate with the EU. The Kremlin is opposing their integration, their wishes, and the EU is helping those countries but without a promise of full integration.

Your mission letter states that you should put forward a new set of long-term policy objectives for the Eastern Partnership by mid-2020. So from your point of view, what should be those EU long-term objectives for the Eastern Partnership region and what concrete geopolitical goals do you personally want to achieve with those countries which are of crucial geopolitical importance for the EU?

1-036-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – The full integration of Ukraine into the European Union is something that is requested by Ukraine. We will have to reflect on this issue ourselves as well. So far, we have not offered this possibility for Ukraine. But what we can do, even in this context, apart from implementing and speeding up the implementation of the DCFTA with Ukraine is to help them to create a solid market economy that attracts foreign direct investment, that creates growth and jobs locally and that strengthens that country. To me, that is going to be a priority.

I think that one of the reasons for the vulnerability, which is profited by one of its neighbours, is down to the lack of a strong economy and I wish to do everything I can to integrate them into as many European policies, already now, as we can, especially when it comes to infrastructure development or the promotion of investments.

As regards geopolitical goals, our goal should be to create stability in the Eastern Partnership, and security. This is what I would be working on together with Josep Borrell.

1-037-0000

Andrius Kubilius (PPE). – My second question is on more concrete matters – on Moldova. As you know, the government of Maia Sandu was voted out because she wanted to reform the prosecutor-general's office in order to fight corruption, to implement (*word incomprehensible*) and to defend the rule of law in that country.

This was expected by many people in Moldova. Unfortunately, the coalition collapsed, and we have what we have. Political stability continues to be in short supply in Moldova.

If you are confirmed, this will be the first crisis for you to deal with. How would you propose to assist in unlocking the situation, without undermining the objectives of the EU and the future of Moldova? In order to get additional leverage, should the EU also put on ice its financial assistance, only recently unfrozen, if Moldova shows a reduced commitment to reforms?

1-038-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – I am familiar with the latest developments, which are not particularly fortunate for Moldova, but I will work with Moldova and for Moldova, so that the reforms are not halted or not backtracked. We have to make sure that even if there is internal crisis, reforms continue.

If they don't, we will have to suspend financial assistance, like it has been done in the past. It is clear that financial assistance is clearly and unconditionally linked to progress in reforms.

1-039-0000

Bernd Lange (S&D). – As Chair of the INTA committee I am deeply involved with trade relations and trade agreements and the macro financial assistance to our neighbour countries.

A little bit in contrary to your opening remarks, due to my experience, the question of human rights, the question of rights of minorities, for example, in the case of Morocco, the question of freedom of expression, the question of independence of juridical systems, are at the top of the agenda of our relations and negotiations.

You are coming from the administration of Mr. Orbán's government, which sometimes has the opposite to the European general perspective. What kind of guarantee can you give me that you will follow up in your new position on the same strong message of the European values as we did before?

1-040-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – As a Commissioner, I have to follow European Union policy. We have developed a very comprehensive set of cooperation, but also of conditions, when it comes to the respect of human rights, freedom of the press, and independence of the judiciary. I intend to continue in that footpath, and I will ensure in all our relations, that these conditions are observed. These are our interests and as a European Commissioner I have to defend the EU interests.

1-041-0000

Bernd Lange (S&D). – Commissioner-designate, imagine there is a candidate country, which has a development which would, if this country would be a member of the European Union, come under the Article 7 procedure. What kind of measures would you take, and how would you address it?

1-042-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – In the enlargement process we have the ‘fundamentals first’ principle, which means if there is no progress or back-tracking on the fundamental rights, the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, negotiations can be halted, chapters cannot be closed or even financial assistance can be suspended.

I will not be afraid to make use of any of these tools at my hand if it is going to be necessary because the conditions are not met.

1-043-0000

Petras Auštrevičius (Renew). – Commissioner-designate, with the new and comprehensive instrument, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, which is under trial of negotiations now, the EU will place even more importance and attention on human rights and, among others, nuclear safety criteria, as primary conditions, once engaging and providing financial support for neighbouring and other third countries.

How do you plan to sustain the conditionality of human rights in relations with third countries where human rights are being violated? Would you be in favour of the new sanctions regime at EU level to impose asset freezes and visa bans on individuals involved in grave human rights violations, as well as violation of the territorial integrity of other countries and the sovereignty of those countries? The list should include state and non-state actors which have contributed physically, financially or through acts of systematic corruption to such abuse and crimes worldwide.

1-044-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – On nuclear safety in relation to Belarus, it is clear that we need to ensure nuclear safety because this is the role of the European Union not only on its territory, but also in its neighbourhood. I will continue to engage with Belarus to ensure that.

Belarus has been cooperative lately. They have been coming forward with a national plan. They have agreed to engage in a peer review. However, there is still work to be done. We need to make sure that our experts can also look at the site and can go there and make sure that nuclear safety is going to be ensured according to our standards. I will work for that.

When it comes to human rights sanctions, sanctions in foreign policy are the harshest tool you can get. So before imposing sanctions there are still other elements and other tools that you can rely on. First I would like to rely on the other tools at my disposal, like suspension of financing and dialogue with these countries. Introducing sanctions must always be a last resort.

Currently, we do not have such a system in place and we would need to convince, first, the Member States to engage in that. Should there be a proposal from a group of Member States, of course I’m willing to look into it and work with them to see what benefits such a system may bring.

1-045-0000

Petras Auštrevičius (Renew). – I am aware of the importance of the sanctions regime, but the old policy didn’t change; I mean, to have a stick and a carrot is still valid.

Commissioner-designate, would you be in favour of having a so-called Magnitsky Act list at EU level, to have this kind of stick? Not necessarily used in every instance, but to be firm, strong, and comprehensive on observing and following fundamental human rights worldwide, and punishing those individuals and countries, which violate it and do it continuously.

1-046-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – I think that the introduction of a sanction regime is a very heavy tool to have and requires proper reflection.

For the time being, we have no such proposal on the table, and we have to look at all the implications should such a proposal come on the table. Currently we are pursuing our objectives with less-restrictive tools and less-restrictive measures, but one should not forget that – for instance, war crimes: we already have the possibility to introduce such sanctions, so it may not be necessary to have one additional set of sanctions, but we could make use of the existing tools that we have at hand, which might include addressing sanctions against individuals who have been committing violations of human rights.

1-047-0000

Βαγγέλης Μείμαράκης (PPE). – Κύριε Πρόεδρε, από τις εξεγέρσεις της Αραβικής Άνοιξης και μετά, οι χώρες της Νότιας Μεσογείου έχουν χαράξει διαφορετικές πορείες και κατευθύνσεις. Παρά το γεγονός ότι η Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση εξ αρχής είχε ταχθεί υπέρ των δημοκρατικών μεταρρυθμίσεων με έμφαση στα ανθρώπινα δικαιώματα, αυξάνοντας μάλιστα την οικονομική της στήριξη, τώρα, σχεδόν εννέα χρόνια μετά, η κατάσταση δεν είναι καθόλου ενθαρρυντική. Πώς αξιολογείτε λοιπόν τον ρόλο της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης τα τελευταία χρόνια και ποιες είναι οι προτεραιότητές σας για την αποτελεσματική αντιμετώπιση της κατάστασης. Πώς σκοπεύετε να διασφαλίσετε ακόμα μεγαλύτερη υποστήριξη στην περιοχή, τόσο από την πλευρά της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης όσο και από τα κράτη μέλη;

1-048-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – I do apologise to the honourable Member, but I failed to catch the very beginning of the question so I don't know which region he is referring to.

1-049-0000

Βαγγέλης Μείμαράκης (PPE). – Μίλησα για τις εξεγέρσεις της Αραβικής Άνοιξης στις χώρες της Νότιας Μεσογείου.

1-050-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – We have seen that the Arab Spring also brought about turmoil in the region and we see the aftermath of that. On the other hand, we have also seen that it can bring democracy closer to our neighbourhood, like in the case of Tunisia.

I would like to engage with all the countries in the region and, as I said, my example would be Tunisia and Morocco, where I see a major opportunity to continue and increase our level of cooperation with them and help them to consolidate the reforms.

When it comes to Tunisia, the potential is, of course, greater. We had democratic elections and now we need to help Tunisia to build a state administration that is functioning and which is capable of making use of our funding, and that is capable of continuing to implement democratic reform and the rule of law.

So I will see to it that we provide all assistance, not only financial but also expertise – technical assistance – once there is a government in place in Tunisia, but also with the new President of Tunisia, to help them put in place an administration that works for the people of Tunisia.

1-051-0000

Βαγγέλης Μείμαράκης (PPE). – Η δημοκρατία και οι ελεύθερες εκλογές αποτελούν, όπως έχουμε ξαναπεί, θεμελιώδεις ευρωπαϊκές αξίες. Υπό αυτό το πρίσμα και κάθε χρόνο, πάρα πολλοί συνάδελφοι συμμετέχουν σε διάφορες αποστολές ως παρατηρητές των εκλογών ανά την υφήλιο. Στις χώρες της Νοτίου Μεσογείου, πολλές από τις οποίες δεν έχουν παράδοση ελεύθερων και δικαίων εκλογών, οι κυβερνήσεις αγωνίζονται να ακολουθήσουν μια δημοκρατική πορεία σύμφωνα με τις ελπίδες και τις

προσδοκίες των λαών τους. Η Τυνησία, όπως είπατε και εσείς, είναι ένα πολύ καλό παράδειγμα και χαιρόμαι που το αναφέρατε. Η Αλγερία, στην οποία ακολουθούν προεδρικές εκλογές τον Δεκέμβριο, κάνει σημαντικές προσπάθειες προς αυτή την κατεύθυνση. Πώς κρίνετε λοιπόν την πορεία της Δημοκρατίας στις χώρες της περιοχής και ποιες πολιτικές θα ακολουθήσετε για να ενισχύσουμε περαιτέρω τις μεταρρυθμιστικές τους προσπάθειες;

1-052-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – I find the electoral observation missions of the European Parliament extremely useful and I would encourage all Members of the European Parliament to continue to participate in those because this not only provides on-the-ground knowledge, whether democratic rules are followed and respected all the way, but also creates ample opportunity to engage with these countries at all levels. I would like to count on your support in participating in these missions and I am more than happy to help you, if I can, with anything in this regard.

On Algeria, yes, there are encouraging developments by the elections coming up in December. However, given the history of Algeria, I think that one has to be very cautious when it comes to discussing their internal matters outside Algeria. We will, of course, encourage them to go ahead on a democratic path but it is for the Algerian people to decide on that.

1-053-0000

Raphaël Glucksmann (S&D). – Monsieur le Commissaire désigné, vous connaissez peut-être cette phrase d'un poète français qui s'appelle Pierre Reverdy et qui dit: «il n'y a pas d'amour, il n'y a que des preuves d'amour» et il en va de même en réalité de l'indépendance. Mon collègue Ernest Urtasun a demandé une preuve d'indépendance, pas simplement un discours sur l'indépendance, une preuve d'indépendance dans la condamnation de cette phrase «si nous parvenons à l'avoir – M. Orbán parle de votre poste – nous serons à votre disposition» et il s'adresse à MM. Erdoğan et Aliyev.

Alors, je répète la même question: nous avons besoin d'une preuve d'indépendance. Condamnez cette phrase et, si vous pouvez donner une autre preuve d'indépendance, est-ce que vous pouvez condamner aussi ce concept de démocratie illibérale qui a fait florès en Hongrie et qui est à l'opposé des principes que nous devons promouvoir dans notre voisinage?

1-054-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – The proof of my independence, I think, is the work I have already carried out for the Commission. For four years I have been head of the unit entrusted with a task which was impossible to achieve for 40 years, and I have contributed to its achievement despite very heavy and very difficult negotiations with a number of Member States. I have been dealing with the task in a highly independent way, without any external influence. To me that is real, tangible, touchable proof of my capacity to act independently.

When it comes to any statement of any government, that is for them to consider. As a Commissioner, as I said, I will follow only the EU line and the position of the Commission, acting in full collegiality with my colleagues in the College.

1-055-0000

Raphaël Glucksmann (S&D). – Oui, s'il vous plaît, donc vous ne voulez pas condamner cette phrase, pas plus que le concept de démocratie illibérale. Alors je vous propose une autre phrase : « chaque migrant pose un risque terroriste et de sécurité publique », ça vient encore de Monsieur Orbán. La question que je veux vous poser est la suivante : puisque la Hongrie a été condamnée, enfin, puisque la Commission a traduit la Hongrie devant la Cour de justice pour non-conformité de la législation relative au droit d'asile et de retour avec le droit de l'Union, comment allez-vous

faire pour mener dans les pays du voisinage une politique qui contredise totalement, sur cette question de l'asile, la politique menée par votre gouvernement en Hongrie ?

1-056-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – My portfolio will cover the external relations of the migration dossier and there I will continue to defend the EU line, which is that we have to help our partner countries – be it south, be it east – to protect their borders and to withstand external pressure from illegal migration, but also to help them to cater for those migrants who are on their territories.

I will help them, just like the previous Commission did, to carry out that task. This is the policy I will represent, and this is the policy I will pursue.

1-057-0000

Viola Von Cramon-Taubadel (Verts/ALE). – Commissioner-designate, your government has been extremely friendly to Mr Putin's Russia. Mr Putin has been to Budapest four times since the occupation of Crimea. More recently, the Hungarian Government allowed the Russian International Investment Bank, often considered as a front for Russian espionage, to operate in Hungary with full immunity. Its staff members have diplomatic passports, plus their financial transactions, their operational work, are excluded from the scrutiny of the EU Member States.

My question will be, how would you be able to step up against Russian influence in the region of the Eastern Neighbourhood, and also in the Western Balkans, when your government has actively promoted and acted on behalf of Russia's interest within the European Union?

1-058-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – The task of a Commissioner is not to pursue any national line and I'm not going to be pursuing any national line, be it Hungarian or be it any other national line. My task is to pursue the European policy which is created by the Council and by this House and this is what I will do. This is going to be my job. As I said, I have been able to do this for four years. I have been trusted enough by the Commission to engage in a very sensitive file, in a very sensitive and highly politicised discussion, and I have been acting in an independent way and this is what I can offer you if you confirm me as Commissioner.

1-059-0000

Viola Von Cramon-Taubadel (Verts/ALE). – We have seen Kremlin-backed propaganda both online and in traditional media, which has a huge influence within EU Member States and also in our neighbourhood. This sort of disinformation campaigns have had a detrimental effect on public discourse, undermining our democracy. My question is, if you are confirmed as a Commissioner, how would you help and support countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova to fight hybrid threats, to fight that war, also considering that even in EU Member States like Hungary, state controlled media are actively spreading fake news with Russian origin?

1-060-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – I will work together with Josep Borrell on this. We have established the Strategic Communications Unit in the European External Action Service (EEAS) which is already doing quite a good job in fending off hybrid threats and also fake news. I will engage with the High Representative, especially in Ukraine, where it also seems that this is a phenomenon that is affecting the public the most. I will deploy all financial means as well so that Ukraine can fight that phenomenon.

1-061-0000

Jérôme Rivière (ID). – Monsieur le Commissaire désigné, c'est parfois répétitif, mais deux sujets attirent particulièrement mon attention: la Turquie et les Balkans de l'Ouest. Vous avez mentionné

les forages illégaux turcs dans les eaux territoriales chypriotes et l'intervention de l'armée turque en Syrie, mais il s'agit des événements les plus récents.

1974: occupation de Chypre; 1983: proclamation d'une République qui n'est reconnue par personne; et de 2014 à 2018, une politique du président Erdoğan qui facilite des transactions financières et pétrolières, lesquelles financent le terrorisme islamiste partout en Europe. Hier, dans l'hémicycle, nous débattions de ces forages illégaux et les groupes ont dénoncé la Turquie quasiment à l'unanimité.

La question qui se pose aujourd'hui est de savoir comment nous devons mettre un terme à cette politique, qui est une politique sadomasochiste entre l'Union européenne et la Turquie: la Turquie menace, triche, agresse et nous payons, et nous payons encore. Ne pensez -vous pas qu'il est temps d'en finir avec le mensonge d'une possible adhésion et de cesser de gaspiller les milliards d'euros que nous leur envoyons?

1-062-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – When it comes to the accession process of Turkey into the European Union, we see that it is already at a standstill. However, stopping or finishing accession negotiations without accession is a major political and strategic decision to be made by this House and to be made by the Council. This is not something that the Commissioner will decide upon. So when we have a full discussion about our future relationship with Turkey of course this is going to be a strategic question that we need to look at. On the other hand, we should not forget that Turkey is the second biggest NATO ally to those Member States who are in NATO and it is a 100-million-inhabitant major country basically in our neighbourhood. So when we are assessing the future relationship, we have to take all factors into account. Accession negotiations is one of them.

1-063-0000

Jérôme Rivière (ID). – En ce qui concerne les Balkans, la politique de l'Union européenne en matière d'élargissement ressemble un peu à celle d'un ballon de baudruche qu'on gonfle, qu'on gonfle... Mais aujourd'hui, notre sentiment, c'est que ce ballon de baudruche explose. Le président Macron, sous la pression notamment de M^{me} Le Pen, de mon parti et des millions d'électeurs qui ne veulent plus de cette politique, a récemment trouvé le chemin de la raison et s'est opposé à l'entrée de la Macédoine du Nord et de l'Albanie dans l'Union européenne. Et les raisons sont objectives: fragilités politique et économique de la Macédoine du Nord, menaces mafieuses en Albanie, minorités serbes menacées au Kosovo - et la Serbie, dont l'histoire n'est pas celle d'une logique occidentale.

J'ai entendu vos réponses et j'ai entendu que vous souhaitiez avant tout mettre l'accent sur les réformes qui sont nécessaires. Mais saurez-vous résister aux pressions d'une majorité qui, ici, s'effrite, qui panique et qui s'engage contre les peuples dans une course effrénée vers toujours plus d'élargissement?

1-064-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, *Commissioner-designate*. – My task as Commissioner responsible for enlargement is not only to convince the Western Balkan countries about our conditions and our priorities and make them deliver those but also to convince our citizens and our Member States that it continues to be in our interest, especially if the conditions that we pose are met. So I will make a bridge between our Member States and the Western Balkan countries, and you can rest assured that I will defend the EU's interests with vigour in the region so that all the conditions and all the concerns are addressed.

On the other hand, we have to provide all incentives for them to be able to grow and to get closer to us. This is also part of the policy I wish to pursue. Through this, we should be able to address all the concerns.

1-065-0000

Bert-Jan Ruissen (ECR). – Kandidaat-commissaris, u hebt al veel gesproken over het Middellandse Zeegebied, Libanon en dat soort landen. Ik heb u nog niet gehoord over Israël. Kunt u ons daar misschien iets over vertellen? Hoe kijkt u aan tegen de relatie van de EU met Israël? En hoe kunnen wij vanuit Europa onze relatie met Israël versterken? We hebben een associatieovereenkomst met Israël. Al heel lang zijn er geen onderhandelingen in het kader van die associatieovereenkomst. Graag hoor ik van u hoe u aankijkt tegen bevordering van de contacten van Europa met Israël. Dank u wel.

1-066-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – Indeed we have an Association Agreement with Israel. We have excellent trade relations with Israel and we have a very high level of cooperation on very many areas like, for instance, research and development and that is very important and we should try to increase our level of cooperation in all those areas.

However, we have also implications in relation to the Middle East peace process and Israel's relationship with Palestine and the occupied territories. There I continue to defend the EU line, which is that only a two-state solution can bring long-lasting peace in the Middle East and we will have to engage with Israel and with Palestine to achieve that.

Of course this is not my primary responsibility but it is the primary responsibility of Josep Borrell, because this is, after all, a major foreign and security policy issue. However, I have the tools at my disposal to encourage this process, but also to stand by the Palestinian Authority and continue to help their work when it comes to catering for refugees or other humanitarian aid that we are providing.

We have seen lately also unfortunate developments in relation to one of the funding organisations in the region. We hope to have that corrected as swiftly as possible in UNRWA and we will sit down with them so that we will only continue funding that organisation once all irregularities are addressed, and fully addressed. But we need to continue to engage with them as they are the ones on the ground.

1-067-0000

Bert-Jan Ruissen (ECR). – Dank u wel voor uw antwoord en toelichting. Ik heb nog een aanvullende vraag hierover. Bent u het met mij eens dat Israël enorm wordt bedreigd, onder andere wegens druk vanuit Iran? Ik realiseer me dat dit een onderdeel is waar u niet primair verantwoordelijkheid voor draagt. Maar ziet u toch een mogelijkheid om vanuit uw portefeuille een bijdrage te leveren en te kijken hoe u de veiligheidssituatie van Israël kunt bevorderen en iets kunt doen aan de dreiging waar Israël mee te maken heeft?

1-068-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – The EU's line has always been that we accept no threat to the security of Israel and, if I get confirmed as Commissioner, we will have to pursue that line. So we have to make sure that any external or internal threats, be it from the Occupied Territories, be it from outside Israel, are not only condemned but also are outright reduced.

When it comes to relations with Iran, as it doesn't fall into my portfolio, it would be very difficult for me to give you a specific answer on that. But what I am ready to engage is, as I said, to provide all the necessary help falling within my portfolio to guarantee security for Israel.

1-069-0000

Lukas Mandl (PPE). – My question is with regard to the Western Balkans in particular to ‘brain drain’ in the Western Balkans.

But first of all, I do not want to miss congratulating you on your nomination. We all should never forget that it’s a privilege to serve the people of Europe in these positions.

Secondly, I am happy that you clearly underlined critics on the Turkish military action in Syria regarding the Kurdish population there, and you also underlined the concerns we as the EU have to have regarding Turkey. I underline that because of negative surprises in the past weeks, and you clearly underlined your position on that.

And this is also connected to ‘brain drain’ because a lot of young people, especially professional young people, well-educated young people leave the Western Balkans. They also leave the Western Balkans towards Turkey, for example from Kosovo, which still has no visa-free travel to the EU, but visa-free travel to Turkey, which means that many young people leave for Turkey. What will you do to solve this issue, or to help the Western Balkan countries to solve the issue of ‘brain drain’?

1-070-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – The best tool to fight ‘brain drain’ is to create a local economy. A local economy that can engage the young professionals from these countries. But to be able to do that, we lack very many things. We lack basic infrastructure, we lack relative development in the economy, foreign direct investment and we lack a competitive education system. This is why the Commission has already engaged in promoting and financing higher education and from this year vocational training as well in the region.

The numbers are very critical. On average we see that 40% of the population of the Western Balkans has left, and those are the young ones, those are the professionals who could make an economy work. We need to re-attract them. But it is only through helping them in this five years to grow, to make these economies grow. Of course this cannot be at the expense of the rule of law, fundamental rights, or any of our fundamental values. This should go hand in hand, otherwise no company from our Union will invest and risk its own capital in a neighbourhood that is unpredictable.

On the Kosovo visa-free regime, unfortunately it is blocked in the Council. And it is blocked also in relation to the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. I see a historic opportunity to come to an arrangement, a peace between the two, hopefully still this year. If that happens, the visa-free issue will also be sorted. Meanwhile we should act to facilitate travel for the Kosovo people.

1-071-0000

Lukas Mandl (PPE). – It’s quite ambitious to talk about this year for such a solution but I like this ambition, this approach. You have several times mentioned the connection with Josep Borrell and you also have mentioned that you see yourself as a bridge-builder between the Council and Parliament, so what do you intend to do to convince the current French leadership of the importance of a strong Europe, which also means a strong accession process for the Western Balkans, and how exactly can we, as Parliament, have an impression about the connection and the cooperation, the so-called foreign affairs cluster, in the future Commission with Josep Borrell and others, and the Commission’s President herself, especially with regard to the Western Balkans?

1-072-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – What I have seen in the Council, I have been present at these debates last year and this year, what I have seen was a failure because of different assessments of the same situation, so my priority will be to have a common assessment of the

Member States and the Commission when it comes to facts on the ground. I want to include the Member States in our field missions at expert level to come and cover the whole region together, look at the facts, look at the developments and let's assess them together so that we can avoid another failure. That way, we will have a clear list of achievables on both sides – both sides meaning the Western Balkan countries and us, and then there will be no surprises.

When it comes to the other question you raised in relation to the French leadership, it is not only of the French leadership, it is also the Dutch leadership I need to convince. It is also the Danish leadership I need to convince. I am happy to do that and I will engage fully from very early on because, without them, it's not going to happen.

1-073-0000

Klemen Grošelj (Renew). – Commissioner-designate the President-elect said that this will be a geopolitical Commission and I would like to hear your position if this means both enlargement and neighbourhood policies are geopolitical tools in the contest with other major players or will we be still following our fundamental values in relation with the countries which are part of our enlargement and neighbourhood policy? I mean, how will you balance those two sometimes quite antagonistic and contradictory principles?

1-074-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – I don't think that these are contradicting principles. We can have enlargement and we have to have fundamental freedoms and rule of law in place in the Western Balkans. Without that there will be no enlargement. We all know that and I will work hand in hand with the Western Balkan countries, but also with our Member States, to make it a reality. I would like to make the accession countries understand that this is not just a broad concept that we, as the European Union, are attached to, but this is something that is necessary for everyday life – everyday life meaning the economy, meaning social life, because otherwise they cannot engage in a more meaningful way with us, and without that they cannot increase the level of trust so that we can welcome them in our Union. This is why we need to work in parallel tracks to increase their possibilities to participate in more and more policies of ours, but on the other hand, make sure that we are not forgetting the fundamentals and they have to deliver there. It is clear from the case we have seen in October at the European Council that otherwise it is not going to be possible, but yet again the European perspective is there. It is unchanged, but it can only be made a reality if all these conditions are met.

1-075-0000

Klemen Grošelj (Renew). – Commissioner-designate I would like to hear your position on IPA since this instrument in the past was used in a very creative way, among other things it was also used for mitigation of the migrant crisis. Will you be advocating a change to this practice, so that IPA will be a tool of pre-accession assistance and help to eligible countries, while for the immigration crisis other perhaps more appropriate mechanisms at EU disposal will be used?

1-076-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – Yes. With the new proposals for the new MFF, it is clear that IPA will be used solely for the purpose of the preparations for accession – capacity building, rule of law and all the other areas that are key to be developed in these accession countries.

We will have another financial tool in the making, which is the NDICI, where we have allocated funds for migration. So there will be no interference; should this be adopted by this House and the Council, we would have no interference between IPA and migration actions.

1-077-0000

Márton Gyöngyösi (NI). – Gratulálok Várhelyi úrnak, hogy elődjével ellentétben eljutott a meghallgatásokig. Várhelyi úr, Önt egy olyan kormány delegálta, egy olyan párt, amely 9 év alatt fokozatosan felszámolta Magyarországon a jogállamiságot, ezért hetedik cikkely szerinti eljárás van hazánkkal szemben, aminek nagyon-nagyon súlyos jogkövetkezményei vannak. Többek között azért, mert a Fidesz egy pártállami rendszert épít Magyarországon, és megszállja a közintézményeket, és sajnos ez alól a külügy és a diplomácia sem kivétel.

Önt is itt sokan úgy ismerik, mint egy Fidesz-pártkatonát, nem pedig közszolgát, még ha a felkészültségét nem is tagadják. Mi a garancia arra, hogy biztosként független lesz Orbán Viktortól és a rendszerétől, a Fidesztől? Mi a garancia, hogy az Európai Uniónak a polgárait, nem pedig a Fidesz oligarcháinak a keleti terjeszkedését fogja szolgálni ebben a pozícióban, illetve hogyan fogja egy olyan párt delegáltjaként számon kérni tagjelölt országokon a demokratikus normákat, amely Észak-Macedóniából, egy tagjelölt államból három tagjelölt államon keresztül csempészett át egy jogerősen elítélt embert, Nikola Gruevszkit? Várom válaszát.

1-078-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, biztosjelölt. – Köszönöm a kérdést Képviselő Úr! Az európai alapító szerződések szerint a Bizottság tagjait a tagállamok kormányai jelölik, egyetértésben az Európai Bizottság elnökjelöltjével. Az én esetemben is ez történt. Pártnak tagja nem vagyok, így nehéz lenne pártdelegáltként definiálni. Ami az Ön által említett menedékes ügyet illeti, azt tudom önnek válaszolni, amit az Európai Bizottság szóvivője is válaszolt, és én ehhez tartom magamat a jövőben is, úgy, ahogy erre már többször itt ígéretet tettem. Teljesen függetlenül fogom végezni a munkámat, minden befolyástól mentesen, ahogyan ezt tettem egyébként már európai tisztviselőként.

Sem kormánytól, sem intézménytől, sem más szervtől semmilyen utasítást nem fogok elfogadni, kizárólag a Kollégium tagjaként fogok tevékenykedni, és a kollegialitás fogja meghatározni a munkámat. A konkrét ügyben a szabályok szerint a tagállamok döntenek a menedékjog megadásáról, ezt tartalmazzák az uniós szabályok, és úgy gondolom, hogy ezek a szabályok irányadóak minden esetben. Éppen ezért ebben az ügyben ennél többet nem tudok Önnek mondani.

1-079-0000

Márton Gyöngyösi (NI). – Köszönöm a választ! Itt, amint látta, ezen a bizottsági meghallgatáson többször kérdésként merült fel az Ön függetlensége, és itt Orbán Viktornak a Türk Tanács előtt tett kijelentését is már kétszer felemlgették. Szerintem fussunk neki harmadjára is, három a magyar igazság. Orbán Viktor, ugye a bakui ülésen, a Türk Tanács bakui ülésén azt mondta, hogy Magyarország most azért harcol, hogy itt, az európai kormányban, a Bizottságban, megszerezzen egy olyan portfóliót, amit Magyarország arra fog használni, hogy a barátainak, Azerbajdzsánnak a keleti partnerség keretében, Törökországnak pedig a tagság vonatkozásában bizonyos szolgáltatásokat tegyen, a törekvéseit segítse.

Függetlenül attól, hogy ki mit gondol az Európai Uniónak és Azerbajdzsánnak, illetve az Európai Uniónak és Törökországnak a viszonyáról, kapcsolatáról, azért az aggasztó, hogy Magyarország miniszterelnöke úgy tekint Önre, mint kézívezérelt bábjára, és szerintem itt már kétszer elhangzott az a kérdés, vagy az a felszólítás, hogy határolódjon el a magyar miniszterelnöktől. Mi a garancia arra, hogy Ön nem Orbán Viktor kijáró embere lesz a Bizottságban? Várom válaszát.

1-080-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, biztosjelölt. – Képviselő Úr! Csak azt tudom mondani, hogy az Európai Bizottság tagjai semmilyen kormánytól, semmilyen más szervtől nem fogadhatnak el utasítást. Én sem fogok elfogadni utasítást, és semmilyen beavatkozást nem fogok eltérni a portfóliómban, vagy a tevékenységemben. Ezek a szabályok köteleznek engem az alapító szerződések alapján, és ezek

szerint a szabályok szerint fogok dolgozni. Ahogyan ezt már tettem az Európai Bizottság vezető munkatársaként, és ahogyan ezt bizonyítottam a munkámmal, hogy képes vagyok és kész vagyok függetlenül dolgozni, minden külső befolyástól vagy nyomástól mentesen.

1-081-0000

Andreas Schieder (S&D). – I want to come back to a question which was mentioned a little earlier. I am the Co-Chair of the EU-North Macedonia delegation and during your mandate as a permanent representative of Hungary, under the leadership of Prime Minister Orbán, Hungary granted asylum to the convicted fugitive and former prime minister of North Macedonia, Mr Nikola Gruevski.

The Hungarian authorities, as a matter of fact, helped a convicted criminal of an EU candidate country to flee from its country in a Hungarian diplomatic car. I believe such an act needs full clarity from you, especially when we need to talk about the rule of law.

Therefore, I think it is also politically and legally incompatible with your future job if you accept what happened as a result of the Hungarian Government's actions. Therefore, I would like to know your opinion on this.

1-082-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – In this specific case, as I have explained to my Hungarian compatriot, the decision to grant asylum under EU law belongs to Member States' competence.

As a Commissioner, it does not belong to my area or portfolio. However, I will not let any external influence on me, on my activity, falling within my portfolio, to accept any approach or any action – be it from a Member State, be it from an institution – that would violate EU law and our fundamental values and principles.

I will stand by these rules in full integrity, like I have already done as a European Union civil servant. This is what I can tell you for the future.

1-083-0000

Andreas Schieder (S&D). – My follow-up question, as I am, as you can imagine, not satisfied with your answer because it was not about the EU law, it was also about the rule of law, which we demand from accession countries. I would ask you: are you ready to publicly invite Hungary, also the Hungarian Government, to return Gruevski to North Macedonia?

1-084-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – Honourable member, as I said, this does not fall within my competence. This is in the competence of the Commissioner responsible for migration. I cannot comment on internal actions. I'm responsible for external actions of the Union.

So this question should be put to Ms Johansson, who will be responsible for migration.

1-085-0000

Kinga Gál (PPE). – Commissioner-designate Mr Várhelyi, we have seen that you have a very rich professional life. You have worked for almost 25 years with EU law and EU-related matters. You have even worked extensively for the European Commission.

How will this experience be useful in your portfolio? What would you underline as a contribution to the European project?

1-086-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – If I have to list I would I would certainly list two things.

First was the Hungarian accession to the European Union. For me personally, that was something that I have put my career on and I have also devoted my studies to this. For me, that was a major success, that after so many years we were able to return to a free Europe, and we had been working very hard with very many colleagues to create this. At first, it was a distant possibility, but it didn't even take 10 years from the beginning of my work to arrive in the European Union. To me that is a major achievement and I'm very proud to be able to contribute to this work and ever since I've been working for a Europe which is stronger.

And that leads me to my second most important achievement which, I consider, is the European unitary patent protection. That was a very challenging task I was hired for, specifically by the European Commission. A task which was considered to be impossible, but we made it. It was considered to be impossible politically, because we couldn't get unanimity from the Member States while it required that. It was difficult because there were very many vested economic interests but we managed to overcome those. And it was difficult because it is a very complex issue, both in terms of institutional knowledge but also technical knowledge. So I'm really proud of these achievements of mine with which I think I have contributed to Europe.

1-087-0000

Kinga Gál (PPE). – The focus here, despite some questions you got here today, is how would you deliver as Commissioner, and I think you assured us quite clearly in this regard. How would you determine yourself? Are you a team player?

1-088-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – I have no choice but to be a team player. If you look at my career, what you will see is that I have been allocated with tasks and duties that I cannot carry out on my own. So, I have always been working in teams, be it the Hungarian administration from my early days, be it the European Commission, or be it the Permanent Representation. One cannot work without a strong team and I have always been very proud of the different teams I've been working on and I've been able to contribute to.

My team currently in the Permanent Representation is something I am very, very proud of. We have the right people on the right job, people who are able to work under pressure, who are able to deliver difficult tasks, but still we act as one. To me, this is very important. It's not me who is representing the Hungarian Permanent Representation as an ambassador when I'm working there, but the whole team, and I'm proud of that.

1-089-0000

Stelios Kouloglou (GUE/NGL). – Mr Várhelyi, let's speak a little bit about this game of independence. As we all know, you were proposed by the Hungarian Government and by Mr Orbán to take this position, right?

And you were asked a lot of times by some other colleagues about the Gruevski affair, about the comments from the Hungarian Government, and you are saying that 'I'm an independent'.

Since you are independent why you are not taking a stand on those issues, specifically, on the issue of Gruevski, on Northern Macedonia, on asylum and on the comments made by the Hungarian Government. You are independent, take a position.

1-090-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – I have taken a position. I consider my position to be the Commission position on this. And the Commission position on this is that granting asylum falls under the competence of the Member States.

If you look back, this is what the Commission has been representing in relation to this case, and I will continue to defend that line. So my independence, I think, is best served by following the European line on this.

And second, as I have explained, this does not fall within my portfolio. It would be ill-fated for me to express myself on other colleagues' portfolios. It would go against the principle of collegiality in the college.

1-091-0000

Stelios Kouloglou (GUE/NGL). – In the event that – in the future within your portfolio and your duties – Hungary takes a stand against the principles of the European Union, are you going to take a stand against the Hungarian Government?

1-092-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – I will have no choice but to take a stand. Yes, and defend the EU values and the EU line against any government, any institution or anybody.

1-093-0000

Kati Piri (S&D). – Mr Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate, let me ask you: for the last five years you were Hungary's ambassador here in Brussels, and I'm sure you were very often asked for advice by, of course, the government you had to represent. And we all wonder here: why is the Hungarian Government so obsessed with having the Commission portfolio for enlargement and neighbourhood, as the role of the Commissioner for this particular post requires a commitment to the EU values and principles above any reproach, and this portfolio is about serving credibly as the EU point of reference to the EU's candidate countries? So could you perhaps explain to us why you think Hungary's government is so interested in this particular portfolio?

1-094-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – This is a very tricky question, because I'm not here to represent the Hungarian Government, I'm here to represent myself. So I cannot give you any answer why it is such an important dossier for the Hungarian Government. But what I can tell you is why a Hungarian can contribute to this portfolio and what is the special knowledge that a Hungarian might bring to this portfolio.

As you know (you are also of Hungarian origin), we are very close to this region. We have been have been engaging very closely with this region, and Hungarians tend to have very good relations with all countries in this region. And from this background, maybe some credibility could be created by taking the same approach and being friendly with all of these countries, and therefore this could be for the benefit of the European Commission.

1-095-0000

Kati Piri (S&D). – Engedje meg, hogy akkor magyarul folytassuk, hogy ha már a magyar dolgokról beszélünk. Ön fogja ellenőrizni a bíróságok függetlenségét, a média szabadságát és a korrupció elleni harcot a tagjelölt országokban. Mit gondol, ezeken a területeken az ország, amelyet legjobban ismer, Magyarország, milyen példát mutat?

1-096-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, biztosjelölt. – Nem az én feladatom biztosként megítélni azt, hogy Magyarország milyen teljesítményt nyújt a jogállamiság terén. Erre legalább két tagja lesz az Európai Bizottságnak, Jourová alelnök asszony és Reynders biztos úr, és úgy én úgy gondolom, hogy akkor járunk el korrekten, és akkor járunk el jogszerűen és kollegiális módon, hogyha ezeket a kérdéseket meghagyom nekik, hiszen ők azok, akik ezt meg tudják ítélni, és nyilvánvalóan meg is fogják ítélni.

1-097-0000

Tineke Strik (Verts/ALE). – Of course we all know that given the mission of the portfolio on enlargement to strongly focus on the rule of law, the future Commissioner must have the utmost credibility in this regard, and his judgments need to be beyond any doubt.

Now Mr Várhelyi, in your written answers you reject the idea that a choice needs to be made between the national and the European interest, but the Article 7 procedure against Hungary taught us that sometimes national positions and European core values are not reconcilable.

While representing Hungary you denied every single conclusion of the Parliament's resolution following the Sargentini report last year on Hungary, and you even stated that Orbán's election victory already shows that there cannot be a problem with the rule of law in Hungary.

Mr Várhelyi, will your government's judgment of Parliament's resolution and the reasoning behind this judgment constitute your frame of reference, your standards, for judging the rule of law in candidate countries? And if not, what evidence can you give us that this is not the case, and that the Copenhagen criteria will not be replaced by Budapest criteria?

1-098-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – In my introduction, the point I made about the need to synthesise the national interest and to come up with the European interest means that these are not mutually exclusive.

My approach and my experience has always been that European interests are always built on the interests of the Member State. The art here is, of course, to find common ground which is acceptable for all.

In the areas where I need to work – in almost every case – I cannot work without unanimous support from the Member States. I will have to work with that in mind – I'm used to that – because the file I mentioned on which I was working in the Commission required precisely that.

But I'm not afraid to make choices, value choices, and those value choices are clear in the Copenhagen criteria. The Copenhagen criteria cannot be mitigated, watered down or even enlarged by a single Commissioner. I do not have that power, and I do not wish to have that power.

The Copenhagen criteria are still the basis of any enlargement process and I will see to it that they are fully respected in all accession countries.

1-099-0000

Tineke Strik (Verts/ALE). – Given your loyalty to the Hungarian Government until now, let me try to get a more convincing answer from your side.

So let me put your answer to the test. Do you think that a state that oppresses opposition parties, almost completely controls the national media outlets, forces judges into early retirement and restricts academic freedom, tolerates widespread corruption or discriminates against minorities would meet the rule of law criteria to become an EU Member State?

1-100-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – If any of the accession countries would be in such a position, and we would see such shortcomings, of course, I would not get the support of the Member States to agree to let that accession country into the European Union.

So my work will be based on the work of my predecessor: to deliver a fully-fledged democratic system in the Western Balkans, with an independent judiciary, with cutting down corruption, with independent democratic institutions, with the checks and balances, and everything that is required in the enlargement framework.

So rest assured that these are the principles I will pursue with our accession countries.

1-101-0000

Irina Von Wiese (Renew). – The President-elect of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has stated in her mission letter to you that you will be working closely with the High Representative on relations with Turkey.

You mentioned Turkey only in passing in your written answers, but Turkey's accession negotiations, of course, have effectively come to a standstill now and no further chapters can be considered for opening or closing.

Meanwhile, Turkey continues to move away from the European Union. A condition for the accession of a candidate country is its respect for common values of the European Union and its commitment to promoting them. As we have heard, these criteria include stability of institutions, guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities.

Specifically relating to these criteria, what steps do you want to see Turkey take before negotiations for accession can commence again?

1-102-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – We need to engage with Turkey in a comprehensive dialogue. In that, of course, we need to continue to insist on our concerns – be it the freedom of the press, be it the independence of the judiciary, be it the imprisonment of journalists or back-tracking on the rule of law. These issues need addressing, not only in the accession context but also in a broader context, because, of course, they have an impact on our relations with Turkey.

But one should not forget our other interests, which are for instance the customs union, but also our relationship when it comes to cooperation on migration.

So one has to take a balanced view without sacrificing any of the fundamental values and principles that we need to defend and we need to continue to defend in Turkey. The dialogue is important in relation to Turkey because without a dialogue, we will have less and less leverage in relation to Turkey.

So for instance, leverage is also very important when we come to the financing – the IPA financing. I didn't have a question on this, but still, I would like to express my view on that – because I know that this is an issue in this House and this House has a very firm position on cancelling fully IPA support to Turkey.

I would have a more cautious approach. It has already been cut from EUR 600 million to EUR 250 million, and we are in the in the process of cutting it further down to around EUR 130 million, but this is the very core of our financing and this finances civil society. If we cut those funds, we will disappear from the Turkish society, so we need to continue. We need to continue to engage.

1-103-0000

Irina Von Wiese (Renew). – Thank you for that. Can you provide us with some clear examples of your own experience in negotiating with accession countries, furthering these values, particularly the rule of law, human rights, and respect for protection of minorities?

1-104-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – It's a difficult question because I have not been running accession negotiations yet with any of these countries. I was representing one of the Member States.

But of course in these discussions when we have been measuring the performance of the different accession countries, these fundamentals were first to be assessed. And, of course, in our neighbourhood we can only feel safe if these fundamentals are respected and these fundamentals are there on a permanent basis, and also backed by the institutions so they not only exist in law as a broad concept.

So, therefore, my plea will be to these countries: not only introduce legislation but also make these principles work for their own people.

1-105-0000

Michael Gahler (PPE). – My question on Turkey actually has just been asked and answered by you and I see thereby that you would probably, with regard to pre-accession, take the line more or less of the European Parliament that we should at least maintain and focus the money on civil society and also continue Turkish participation in programmes like Erasmus+, so that should be, I think, an agreed line. Thank you for this common position with regard to the European Parliament.

In order to meet the concerns of some Member States – and I am now shifting a bit to the Western Balkans again – with regard to starting the accession negotiations for North and Macedonia and Albania, I wonder whether you would apply the Copenhagen criteria in such a way that every country is indeed judged according to its own merits, and I wonder whether our methodology should therefore not be about a package deal but about assessing each country's state of affairs as it is and also noting recent regressions? Could you imagine a situation where, in order to get unanimity in the European Council, one could suggest that only one of the two countries start negotiations, so as to keep the momentum at least?

1-106-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – This is a very difficult and yet strategic question. My answer to it is two-fold.

First of all, no accession process can be credible without the 'own merit' principle: no achievement, no appraisal. This is clear and we have to stick to that.

We might come to a critical point that we have one or two or three of the candidate countries who accomplish to meet all the conditions. I have no *a priori* on this. If it is one, it is one. If it is two, it is two. If it is three, it is three. But we should not help hold back anybody from achievement, and of course the single biggest incentive we can give is if they engage, then we engage more. So yes, it is possible. It is possible to abandon any group approach, but it might happen that we will have a group. So let's not rule that out.

The second element is of course the politics, the geopolitics of the Balkans. The Balkans is a very sensitive region where our job for the next five years should be to create long-term prosperity, long term stability and democracy.

Now of course making such choices that only one or two countries can accede will have a direct implication on this. So when we are considering this we should also have that at the back of our minds.

1-107-0000

Michael Gahler (PPE). – Of course, we cannot predict – we are not prophets – where we will stand in five years, but if it were for you to decide or to choose, where would you see us in terms of length of negotiations?

I have no illusions, looking at how long it took from the start for Croatia to entering – it was eight years – so perhaps we will also see in the next five years intense negotiations but not yet an accession. But what would be your ideal perspective for that? And accordingly, for the neighbourhood only, in the east, the three more ambitious countries – can we involve them more than with implementation of the DCFTA only?

1-108-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – I will try to do it in one minute but there were very many questions. Five years from now, my vision would be to have a much more developed Western Balkans, having peace between Kosovo and Serbia, Kosovo having full visa liberalisation and free travel and accession negotiations very much advanced with North Macedonia and Albania, maybe close to an end, and a Serbia that is ready to join. That would be my dream in five years from now. I know that it may sound a bit too much, a bit over ambitious, but no ambition no achievement. That would be my dream in five years.

When it comes to the Eastern Partnership, my approach to the Eastern Partnership countries, especially those three with Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) is that, if they can do more we are here to help. And we are ready to do more and to integrate them into our daily life through digital, through the Green Deal (there is a huge potential in that region) or through transport and energy.

1-109-0000

Chair. – Colleagues, let me thank you all for your questions. Let me also thank the Commissioner-designate for answering all our questions.

Mr Várhelyi we will now give the floor once again to you for a brief closing statement of up to five minutes. Please go ahead.

1-110-0000

Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner-designate. – Chair, honourable Members, thank you all for this open and honest exchange of views. You have very clearly put on the table what your priorities are concerning the enlargement and neighbourhood portfolio.

You have also clarified what you expect from me if you decide to approve my nomination. You have also listened to my priorities and I hope now, at the end of our discussion, we share the view that there is an overwhelming convergence between our objectives.

We need to strengthen the enlargement process and reinforce a credible European perspective to the Western Balkans. We need to ensure tangible results in the short-term for the people of our neighbourhoods in their everyday life through economic development.

This will increase our role and leverage throughout. We need sufficient financial resources in the next financial framework to support our policy objectives. All efforts should fully reflect and serve

our values and interests, be it the Western Balkans, the eastern partners or the southern neighbourhood.

I believe this is an excellent basis to work together. I am determined to work closely with the European Parliament and with members of this committee in particular. What is more, I see an important complementarity between our roles. I will count on fully using parliamentary diplomacy and relations with governments in the interest of the European Union. I will provide all the support you need to work efficiently.

Finally, let me reflect on the anniversary of an event that played a key part in shaping today's work. Thirty years ago, on 9 November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. It opened the way to the reunification of Germany and the reunification of Europe. It was a historic opportunity, and European leaders were brave to take it. It was not easy. It was not obvious. Many had doubts, warned about the dangers, tried to slow down the events, but history proved them wrong.

Today we are all grateful to those who made it possible. Today we know that it was the general European interest to tear down the wall and spread democracy, prosperity and the rule of law through a unified Germany and a unified Europe.

It is an immense success. However, we are not yet at the end of the road. We need to continue spreading democracy, prosperity and the rule of law to the heart of our continent, the Western Balkans. It is their interest; it is our interest. We have an historic opportunity to establish under this mandate long-term peace, stability and prosperity for a region that has not seen it for quite a while.

We should not miss this historic opportunity, so that 30 years from now, we can proudly look back and say we are worthy of the predecessors who built Europe. We have also played our part. We should not hesitate any longer to spread our hands to help our neighbours coming closer to us, based on their wish and on their merits.

I will work on this and I would like to be your partner in making this happen. Thank you very much for your attention.

(Applause)

1-111-0000

Chair. – Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank our guest for participating in today's meeting. I would like to thank colleagues for putting very interesting questions and also for all colleagues sticking to their time limits – that was very helpful for us here up front.

Finally, let me thank once again, on behalf of our committee, Mr Olivér Várhelyi for being with us for nearly three hours answering all our questions.

The meeting is now concluded.

(The hearing closed at 10.34)