

Algirdas Šemeta

Commissioner designate for Taxation and Customs Union, Audit and Anti-Fraud

Opening remarks

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

European Parliament Hearing

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Madame la Présidente, Messieurs les Présidents,

Honourable Members,

I am delighted to stand before you today as Commissioner designate for Taxation, Customs Union, Audit and Anti-fraud.

In other words – as Commissioner for welding together a broad range of financial, fiscal and information tools to create an engine for one task - to drive Europe towards meeting the expectations of its people.

Economic progress, creating better jobs and stronger social guarantees - these are the hopes and needs of Europeans today. Security and safety, climate threats, energy supply and the costs they bring - these are the worries of citizens.

These concerns must become the guidelines for any initiative of the Commission. Let me assure you, they would form the red thread for all decisions and actions under my responsibility.

Taxation, in my view, is much more than collecting revenue. Just like audit and anti-fraud go far beyond checks and controls. These instruments hold a much greater potential. It can and, especially now, must be fully exploited to forward Europe's economic and social development.

If you support my candidacy, I would become a Member of the Commission with a particularly broad portfolio that connects two logically related fields.

Income and expenditure – these are the two sides of the budget. Their collection and allocation – two stages in the same cycle. Both must serve the same objective – to create benefit for society. Both are subject to the same principles – transparency, simplicity, accountability and responsibility.

And of course - respect for taxpayers' money.

I am convinced of this. Therefore, the fight against fraud on both the revenue and expenditure side will be at the heart of my considerations.

Without any doubt, I fully understand the importance of the European Anti-Fraud office OLAF. After the first decade of its work this service has gained experience and consolidated its reputation. I would like here to pay a particular tribute to the enormous contribution of Franz-Hermann Brüner, the first Director-General of OLAF, who so sadly passed away this weekend.

We are all targeting the same goal –reinforcement of OLAF's efficiency. New challenges require a fresh look and further improvements.

There is no lack of ideas. But to find the right solution and to achieve the best result we will have to be open-minded. We will have to responsibly explore all possible options by attentively assessing the proposals that have already been delivered and carefully preparing the ones to be tabled in the future.

Independence of OLAF, different aspects of its accountability, establishment of the European Public Prosecutor's Office – these are important and complex issues. I am aware that Parliament has clear views on these matters. I value your comments and look forward to our discussions on this issue. Allow me to underline that I am committed to maintaining an open and constructive dialogue with you as I prepare and take forward the necessary proposals.

When we are talking about the EU budget expenditure no argument can justify misuse or abuse – it is the peoples' money we are spending. Therefore quality of the EU spending and its audit will be at the top of my priorities.

We are not starting with a blank sheet: the progress that has been made during recent years is obvious. Nevertheless we have to continue working on this to be sure that every euro is spent in its best way.

My goal in this area will be to minimise the risk of errors at minimum administrative cost. The measures I propose are more transparency and less red-tape and full responsibility where money is misspent.

Openness and accessibility to information is an essential pre-condition of accountability. This is why I put much value upon further development of the transparency initiative.

Preparation of the concrete proposals for the tolerable risk of error will be one of my tasks in the field of control of budgetary spending. I will be working on it together with my fellow Commissioners responsible for the specific areas.

I am convinced that there is a possibility as well as necessity to further simplify rules and eligibility requirements for the beneficiaries of the EU funding. This would contribute to speeding-up the journey of the EU financial support to its final destination where the concrete European projects are implemented. This would also help us to find a prudent balance between financial discipline, accountability, transparency and simplicity. I believe these solutions could support further progress towards a positive statement of assurance, which is in my view one of the primary goals.

In materialising these objectives I will seek close cooperation with the Court of Auditors and with the European Parliament's Budgetary Control Committee. I consider your input in this area to be extremely valuable and I will therefore react in a constructive manner to any recommendations put forward during the discharge procedure.

Honourable Members,

My work as Minister for Finance and, over the last months, as Commissioner responsible for the Budget has provided me with insight into EU economic and financial matters.

These – I would say "horizontal" – functions have enabled me to see the broader picture. That is to say not the millions in the budget but rather their potential benefit to society. Not taxes but rather their impact on employment, social security and economic development.

I therefore view tax and customs policy not merely as a set of fiscal measures to ensure sufficient budget revenue. It is a lever enabling many of the processes of society to take place.

Europe is at a turning point. The economy is coming out of freefall. The situation remains fragile, however. We therefore have to intensify our efforts to revitalise the economy. And – at the same time – ensure stable public finances. We must remember that most taxes are ultimately paid by the citizens. Every decision we make on taxation affects every family one way or another.

This is why each tax instrument must therefore be subject to a thorough impact analysis. Every decision must, firstly, reflect an idea, secondly, meet a public objective and, thirdly and most importantly, contribute to its realisation.

How would I achieve this in the field of taxation and customs?

First and foremost, I would reflect on the internal market. It is indisputably one of the most significant achievements of European integration. However, we also have to

be self-critical: not all of the advantages of the internal market are being fully exploited.

We will have to ascertain which tax obstacles make the lives of businesses and citizens more difficult. Senseless tax barriers must be eliminated without delay. Double taxation issues must be solved in a manner which is expeditious and favourable to taxpayers.

We need to take a fresh look at the option of a Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base. Harmonisation and, I would like to stress – simplification, of the rules for the calculation of this tax base could open broader opportunities for our companies to use the benefits of the internal market. It would reduce their costs and support business mobility and its competitiveness in the world.

Intensive work on good governance within EU and outside, reduction of administrative burdens, simplification of the tax system, reduction of the time taken to make tax refunds, etc. This is by no means an exhaustive list of work that needs to be done. One of the "hottest" issues at the present time is energy. I would initiate and promote tax innovations which would strengthen the efficiency of this sector and contribute to decisions relating to environmental protection. The focus on "green" issues must be enshrined in our tax philosophy.

I am determined to modernise customs. A 21st century Europe demands a 21st century customs system. Here I am speaking of e-Customs, based on a modern code and making effective use of the potential of information technology. Such a customs system would enable both businesses and citizens to save time and money. Moreover, it is the only system which would be able to fulfil its mission in qualitative terms by ensuring protection of borders, markets and property rights (including intellectual property). And most importantly – the safety of our people.

In presenting my priorities, I have repeatedly referred to economic, budgetary and tax policy. I would stress, however, that I do not consider the economy to be an end in itself but rather a means to an end.

The economy must work for the implementation of ambitious European ideas. At the same time, it must accelerate changes which people are waiting for in their everyday lives and strengthen a social model which does not marginalise a single citizen.

This is a tall order. I do not doubt that the key is to concentrate the efforts of the institutions. Therefore, close cooperation with you will underpin every stage of my work in the future.

I firmly believe that trust is the essential element which makes fruitful cooperation possible. I will be ready to openly inform you about emerging problems, not only about successes and achievements.

I hope that this hearing will lay the ground for such a dialogue.

Thank you.