

SPEECH

Vice-President / Commissioner-designate M. ŠEFČOVIČ

Parliamentary hearing Strasbourg, 18 January 2010, 18 h

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Mr. Chairman,

Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen !

It is a great honour and privilege for me to come before you today to seek your approval on my nomination as Commissioner in charge of inter-institutional relations and administration.

As I have already outlined in my written replies to your questionnaire, I have been actively involved in EU affairs for almost 15 years. I have witnessed from very close quarters the enormously positive transformational power of the EU. This has turned the country I know best, Slovakia, into a fully-fledged and democratic member of the European family. Thanks to this transformational power, 20 years after the fall of the iron curtain, its citizens can move freely, live, study and work in Europe without border controls, pay with one single currency and, most importantly of all, live in a stable and peaceful democratic environment.

As a diplomat, I had the opportunity to witness the huge respect and esteem which the EU enjoys abroad. I experienced for myself how often other regions take the EU as a good example and try to build a similar system of co-operation. I spoke with many citizens of those countries who long for the democracy, solidarity and prosperity that we know and have in Europe.

It is this firm belief in the transformational power of the EU, its use for the benefit of its citizens and for reinforcing the position of the EU in the world, which is my main motivation to work as a Member of the European Commission.

I am convinced that the date 1 December 2009 will enter into the history books as a new beginning for the EU. The **Lisbon Treaty** provides a unique opportunity to put the EU on a completely new basis, where decisions at European level will become more understandable and appreciated by European citizens. Where the EU institutions will cooperate more intensively and where the EU will become a stronger global actor.

In my dealings with EU affairs, I have experienced at first hand the complexity and growing importance of inter-institutional relations. The Lisbon Treaty has elevated these relations to a new level. I am happy to see that, in particular, the role of the European Parliament as a co-legislator has been reinforced, putting it on an equal footing with the Council.

We have to start building this new system by strengthening the special partnership between the European Parliament and the European Commission.

As Vice-President / Commissioner-designate for inter-institutional relations, I will strive to ensure that inter-institutional relations bring about a true inter-institutional partnership. As announced in my written replies, I would like to take the special partnership between the European Parliament and the Commission to a new level – along the lines set out by President Barroso in his political guidelines – by reinforcing and complementing the existing mechanisms of co-operation. The process of revising the existing **Framework Agreement** between our Institutions has already started and this process will be the opportunity for us to upgrade this agreement accordingly. There are important issues at stake, such as the flow of information between our two institutions, including rules on confidential information, provisions on political responsibility of Commissioners and legislative programming, to mention just a few.

If I get your support, I intend to enter into a constructive dialogue with the Conference of Presidents, with the Conference of Committee Chairs, the Committee on Constitutional Affairs and other relevant Committees, as well as individual Members of this House to present the positions of the Commission and listen carefully to your positions and comments on a regular basis.

As Vice-President / Commissioner-designate for inter-institutional relations, it is a particular pleasure for me that, if approved, I will be responsible for important aspects of the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty. I would work with all institutions to make sure that the potential of this Treaty can be used to the full and that, together, we will implement

the new provisions in a swift and effective fashion. I count on the support of Parliament and, in particular, the Committee on Constitutional Affairs in this important endeavour.

In order to implement the Lisbon Treaty, a number of concrete Commission initiatives are necessary. You have already received a Commission Communication on the application of **Article 290 TFEU** (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union) on **delegated Acts**, which was drawn up with the full and very constructive involvement of the European Parliament's services. I am, of course, ready to discuss this with you in more detail. Immediately after my appointment, I will propose to the College a draft regulation on **implementing acts** under **Article 291 TFEU** to replace the Comitology decision of 1999. I welcome the fact that Parliament and Council have agreed on an interim practical arrangement to regulate the functioning of Comitology committees after the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon and until the new Comitology Framework Regulation is in place.

As regards the **Citizens' Initiative**, I believe it is one of the most innovative new features of the Treaty. I am fully aware of the huge interest which the European Parliament, and notably its Committees on Constitutional Affairs and on Petitions, has in this subject. I think we all share the ambition that Council and Parliament should adopt the relevant legislative proposal as early as possible. The current Commission has already issued a Green Paper at the end of last year, the consultation phase of which ends in a couple of days. I intend to come forward with the proposal for a Regulation during the spring. I commit myself to do my utmost to allow for a rapid agreement, which would enable citizens to use their new rights as quickly as possible. I look forward to working very

closely with the European Parliament on this important element of the Lisbon Treaty.

As I have already indicated in my written replies, the setting-up of the **European External Action Service** does not fall within the remit of my portfolio. I know, however, that the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, and notably your rapporteur Mr BROK has a huge expertise and keen interest in this matter. I assure you that I will follow this process closely, not least because, in my capacity as Vice-President / Commissioner in charge of administration, it will be my responsibility to present a proposal for amended Staff Regulations, which will be an important element in the setting-up and running of the EEAS. As Baroness ASHTON already said in the opening statement of her hearing last Monday, we need to create something that adds value for citizens to what our Member States are already doing and that gives non-Europeans a reliable partner. We need the best and the brightest working for it. From all relevant backgrounds in the Commission, the Council Secretariat and the Member States. And I fully agree with her that we should also consider opening this further in the future. Providing administrative support to the EEAS via service level agreements could be in my view also an important element in rendering the newly created service both efficient and cost effective at the same time. In this context, I am thinking of areas such as human resources management (including the financial rights of the personnel), information and communication technology, logistics and security. Accountability of this new service to the European Parliament is, I am convinced, essential. With full respect and recognition of the inter-institutional balance foreseen in the Treaty, I therefore intend to contribute my share to achieving it and will work closely with my colleague Baroness ASHTON.

The Lisbon Treaty also provides for a significant increase in the role of **National Parliaments** at EU level and recognises their role as "*contributing actively to the good functioning of the Union*". I am convinced that the Treaty opens the door to further deepening the active and constructive role of National Parliaments in European policy-making and that the role played by the 40 Chambers will contribute to making the European Union more democratic and more transparent. I am personally committed to further developing and deepening the Commission's relations with National Parliaments and to establishing a true political partnership with them, in full respect of the respective prerogatives of the EU institutions and in full transparency.

The Commission is committed to a high level of transparency vis-à-vis the general public. It has taken a range of initiatives aimed at improving transparency, in particular as regards lobby activities, the work of expert groups and specialised committees and the beneficiaries of EU funds. I strongly support efforts towards greater transparency and am therefore pleased to take over from my colleague Siim KALLAS the responsibility for the "**European Transparency Initiative**", launched by the Commission in 2005. I know that, in particular, the Budget Control and Budget Committees have a keen interest and huge experience in these topics and I look forward to entering into very open and constructive co-operation with them.

The Commission set up its **Register of interest representatives** in June 2008. I believe that the first year of operation confirms that the choices the Commission has made are adequate. A very large number of Brussels-based interest representatives are already in the Register and registrations are still coming in regularly. As to the inter-institutional discussions, I welcome the work accomplished by the bilateral working

group. I am confident that we can achieve in the near future a common Register, shared by Parliament and the Commission, and - just like the Parliament - we think the Council should join our discussions.

With regard to **public access to documents**, I would like to underline that under Regulation 1049/2001 the number of access requests is increasing every year and the Commission grants access in the vast majority of cases. I will work with the European Parliament and the Council to conclude the revision of the Regulation as soon as possible and am open to consider any suggestion aimed at improving the Regulation, provided that its effective functioning is not hampered.

President Barroso stated in his political guidelines that he intended to review the **Code of Conduct for Commissioners** and that he hoped that the Code would become a reference document inspiring other EU institutions. This is a goal I fully support and I am ready to work to achieve this in my dealings with this Parliament.

In many of the conversations which I have recently held notably with Members of the Budget Control and Budget Committees, the **building policy** of the Commission has been mentioned as a matter of concern. As you know, due to the long-lasting uncertainty about the Commission's permanent seat, its real estate deployment in Brussels has happened only gradually. Only with the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997, where the Member States confirmed Brussels as the headquarters of the European Commission, could we include purchasing as an option for acquiring office space. In 2003, the two offices named "OIB" and "OIL" were

created with the aim of improving, amongst other things, real estate management. The Commission has recently developed some key elements for its future building policy, which I will build on if approved. Two central projects have already evolved in this context: The “Projet urbain Loi”, which aims at creating a sustainable area at Rue de la Loi with a mix of offices, housing, shops and cultural/leisure facilities accessible to all. And the search for an additional site outside the current European quarter. I would like to assure you that I will advance these projects in full transparency and with the strictest adherence to the financial and other rules and criteria. I will provide the European Parliament, as the budgetary authority, with all the necessary information.

For the European Commission, the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty also presents new challenges with regard to organisational and staff matters, and this not only in the short-term. We need to make sure that the Commission attracts, trains and retains highly skilled and motivated staff so that the institution can achieve its policy objectives with the right resources in the right place at the right time. I want to contribute to the development of a European public service which would become one of the best in the world.

Therefore, I would like to put a focus, in my capacity as Vice-President / Commissioner in charge of administration and if I am approved, on a **sound HR vision and strategy**, carefully considering the added-value and cost-benefit of the processes involved. In this context, I see three main priorities: First, the **optimal allocation of our human resources**. This will require a continuous fine-tuning of the Commission’s structures and staffing according to its priorities, shifting from support functions to policy priorities against the background of the 2013 "zero-growth" target.

Secondly, **financial sustainability**. We need to look into the efficiency and overall stability of the institution's pay, pension, unemployment and sickness insurance schemes. Thirdly, the **sustainability of the legal framework**. In recent years, the European Union's working structures have undergone quite extensive changes, notably through the increasing number of decentralised bodies such as agencies. In this new environment, I want to ensure the strict compliance with the Staff Regulations and the principle of equal treatment. Any new rules must be guided by the principles of simplification and clarification.

Mr. Chairman,

Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen !

I have presented to you some of my short- and medium-term priorities which I consider important for my future responsibility as Vice-President / Commissioner in charge of inter-institutional relations and administration, if I am approved. There are some urgent matters, which we need to tackle immediately. I promise you that – should I get your approval – I will start working on them together with you straight away. Now I am looking forward to answering to your questions.

Thank you very much !