

Statement by Commissioner Oettinger at the European Parliament Plenary session on the integrity policy of the European Commission, in particular the appointment of the Secretary-General of the European Commission

[This is a translation of the German version as delivered by Commissioner Oettinger]

Opening remarks

Mr Tajani,

Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

Ladies and gentlemen,

You have invited me here today to deliver a statement on the Commission's behalf concerning its integrity policy and its functioning as regards, *inter alia*, the appointment of the official, Martin Selmayr to the post of Commission Secretary-General with effect from 1 March this year.

Let me begin with a few observations as to the context. On 21 February the Commission adopted a package of decisions concerning its senior management. Why do we do it this way?

With the number of Directorates-General at our service and the multitude of senior management posts, we would otherwise be taking a decision almost every week. This, however, would create disruption among our services, so we have opted for regular packages. This is the only way for us to assure a balanced overall development in the interests of our institution as regards, for instance, different nationalities; we take account of factors such as seniority, age, nearness to retirement and of the priority objective of effectively increasing the proportion of women in senior management.

The last package was prepared by my predecessor; it was discussed by the College in late June 2015 and approved. Incidentally, that package included – along with numerous posts for Commission Directors-General and Deputy Directors-General of both genders – the decision to appoint Alexander Italiener to succeed Catherine Day as Secretary-General. The package adopted at the end of June 2015 was actually comparable in every way to that tabled for decision a few weeks ago.

We have an established procedure for this. I would like to emphasise three points: we adopt these decisions on the basis of the Staff Regulations of the

European Union. This is our right and our obligation and we proceeded in exactly the same way in this instance. We took this decision with the agreement and involvement of the Member of the Commission responsible, the coordinating Vice-President, myself and the President, too.

All the College of Commissioners' decisions of 21 February were taken at my proposal and that concerning the Secretary-General at the direct proposal of our President, as provided for in the division of responsibilities within the Commission. All decisions, including the appointment of the new Secretary-General, were unanimously approved by all Members of the Commission. I can refer you to the minutes of the Commission's meeting of 21 February, which – in line with our transparency rules – we have published, as we do after every meeting.

Second, I am absolutely certain – and nobody else has ever suggested otherwise – that the official, Martin Selmayr possesses all the qualities required for the function of Secretary-General of the European Commission. He has years of experience in key posts at the Commission. As an excellent lawyer and a skilled communicator, he is definitely completely suitable for the job. He combines hard work, talent, qualifications and commitment to the European idea with political nous. He also has the trust of our Commission's President, my trust and that of the entire College of Commissioners.

In response to the procedural issues that have been raised, including publicly in recent days, it can be replied that the procedure and its time-limits have been respected fully in the case of this package and Martin Selmayr's appointment under Article 7 of the Staff Regulations to the post of Secretary-General: it began with the Deputy-Secretary-General's publication of a vacancy notice, which was followed by the assessment centre with its external assessment of candidates, an interview with the Commission's Consultative Committee and a final interview with the President and myself the day before the decision. This selection procedure complied with the Staff Regulations: as Commissioner responsible for personnel matters, it was my job to make sure of this and that is what I did.

When selecting a Secretary-General, neither nationality nor membership of a political party – if any – plays any part; the one and only consideration is fitness for this office, in order to assure the functioning of our institution and to guarantee that it follows the course charted by the President of the Commission. And we consider the candidate, the selected official, Martin Selmayr, wholly suitable for the post.

In short, we can demonstrate that due account was taken of the rules, that the procedure complied with these rules and that the candidate also possesses all the qualifications sought. We would therefore ask you to scrutinise this decision but then also to accept it.

Thank you.

Closing remarks

Ms Grässle,

Dear Colleagues,

Please accept my assurances that I, speaking both for the Commission and also for myself, have the utmost respect for Parliament's importance, that I am appearing before you with humility, that I have no desire to treat you like small children, that I take your questions very seriously and approach your scrutiny with solemnity and equanimity. Let us treat each other with respect.

Second: some speakers have spoken of fraud, corruption, scandals, intrigue, personal benefit. This is already more than reason enough for us – for me – to have every interest in objective scrutiny in and by the Committee on Budgetary Control. We will answer all questions in that forum. Questions we received in writing with the postmark of 5 March will be promptly answered by 14 March, regardless of the tight deadline.

Why am I here? Because the Conference of Presidents decided I should be. This House, its President and the chairs of its political groups – with the exception of the ECR and EUL – decided by a large majority that it is Oettinger's portfolio, so Oettinger has to come here. That is why I am here. If the Conference of Presidents had wanted my President to speak, I am sure that he would be here today. In short, I am here because the Conference of Presidents, your conference, said during the preparations that this was what it expected of the Commission. We are meeting your expectations.

Secretary-General Martin Selmayr has been spoken of – and I quote – as an 'éminence grise'; 'this German, Selmayr'; 'nobody knows him'. I would hope that discrimination is not accepted in Europe. We should not discriminate against civil servants in any way either. For the press to use the term 'monster' is a matter of the freedom of the press. But I believe that every civil servant, whatever their rank, has done enough to warrant due consideration and respect from all of us.

You hear people say that the Germans are ruling Europe again with this appointment. Well, I often hear people in Germany ask why every Member State is represented by a Commissioner, why the biggest and the smallest Member States all have just one Commissioner. It seems right to me. I believe every Member State can and should be represented on an equal footing in the Court of Justice, the Court of Auditors, the Commission. But, believe me, in the big Member States, people ask why it is just one in 28. Or, taking the example of this House, they wonder why the small Member States have one Member per 90 000 inhabitants while the big Member States have one per 900 000: one man, one vote. I nevertheless consider it right that Malta and Luxembourg should be represented by six Members. But I want to address the question of the fair representation of our Member States [*Interruption from the audience*] The question of nationality is completely secondary for me.

I consider myself a European citizen who is one of 28 making up the Commission. I therefore believe that where you were born and the date on your passport should not really be that important.

It has been said that the Commission is not elected; I flatly disagree. Would-be Commissioners are proposed by their democratically elected

governments. They are grilled by a specialised committee representing this House. They are elected by this House. They are elected by the European Council.

I know of many Member States where ministers can be appointed without involving the national parliament at all. If, for instance, the Chancellor is elected in Germany in two days, the ministers will be decided by the parties and confirmed by the President: no election, no hearing, nothing at all in [the Bundestag]. That is why I believe that the Commission satisfies democratic principles better than many other bodies at national level.

I can also tell you that this Commission has never had the intention of laying on official cars, drivers and offices for all Commissioners after they leave office. I consider this fake news; we have proved this a number of times. And I can assure you that there is no proposal for which I am responsible to make any such changes whatsoever in respect of all Commissioners after they leave office.

It has been said that some colleagues may be respecting the letter of the rules. I consider the letter fundamental to complying with the rules. That is why I view the checks with interest. We have followed all the rules to the letter. Some doubt this. Have us checked; I am only too happy to answer your questions.

But the Staff Regulations governing promotions and appointments at the Commission are not the President's Staff Regulations. The Staff Regulations under which Martin Selmayr was appointed Secretary-General were adopted by this House – and the Council. They are your Staff Regulations, the letter of your laws, your rules. If you want to change them, we will have to discuss it. I am sorry, but the Staff Regulations and what was decided by the Council were the work of the democratic bodies of the Council and Parliament. All this can be changed, but these appointments are not made arbitrarily by the Commission but on the basis, –according to the letter and – I maintain – the spirit of what has been decided by Europe's democratic bodies.

We have three possibilities when deciding on posts and appointments: an internal vacancy notice, an external vacancy notice and an internal transfer. All three – internal vacancy notice, external vacancy notice and internal transfer – are covered by our Staff Regulations. The official, Martin Selmayr was our President's chief of staff for three years. And this post – chief of staff – is equivalent to that of a director-general, while a Commissioner's chief of staff is equivalent to a director. And, as you know, he has in the last three years held and performed a function that has equipped him for the office of secretary-general.

We should not create a caricature of Mr Selmayr either. He is not a party hack, a monster or an incompetent. So, by all means watch him like a hawk, but please give him a chance to show what he can do over the next few months. I am sure that he will do an excellent job and do so as a servant of the President Juncker and the Commission. I do not think caricatures of any shape or form are called for here. If you do not like him, if you do not trust him, say so. But nobody in this House has criticised his qualifications, his

professional competence or his performance in various posts over the past few years.

We are glad to answer the Committee on Budgetary Control's questions. We will also answer written questions. I myself am always ready to appear before your bodies – before meetings of your groups, including for bilateral discussions. I will be happy to respond – to the satisfaction, I believe, of all with questions – to your concerns and questions over the next few weeks with clear answers and with an eye to the European Staff Regulations, rules and statutes.

Thanks for now.