

Hungarian Commissioner-designate rebuts questioning of impartiality

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Olivér Várhelyi faced off attacks on his independence during his confirmation hearing in Parliament on Thursday.



Olivér Várhelyi | *Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual*

Addressing MEPs in a three-hour hearing, the former EU official had to defend himself on several occasions, with deputies questioning his independence and impartiality together with Hungary's perceived failure to uphold the rule of law.

Várhelyi, who formerly worked at the European Commission, was asked how, if approved in his post, he could guarantee that he "would not take instructions" from Viktor Orbán, the controversial Hungarian Prime Minister who has regularly found himself at loggerheads with the EU over the rule of

law and attacks on civil society in the country.

In response, Várhelyi told deputies at his hearing, “An EU commissioner cannot take instructions from any Member State government or any other institution. I will obey this rule and follow the rules of the EU’s founding treaties. These will guide me in my work.”

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While some members said they were “not happy” with his replies, he added, “As head of a unit at the European Commission I think I proved my ability to work independently of any external influence.”

He also said his extensive EU experience would help guide him if, as expected, he is approved as a commissioner to join Ursula von der Leyen’s new executive.

He told members, “Hungarian accession to the EU is something I have been devoted to and, after so many years, we returned to a free Europe. I am proud to have contributed to this.”

Asked if he was a “team player”, he said, “I have no choice but to be one. During my career I have always worked in teams, be it the Hungarian administration, the Perm Rep here in Brussels or at the Commission.”

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Olivér Várhelyi

He was also asked about asylum and migration policy but pointed out that this was not part of the dossier assigned to him by von der Leyen, adding “as such it would be wrong” to comment on the issue.

Socialist MEP Kati Piri, who had earlier reportedly said she had “serious concerns” about his nomination, told Várhelyi, “For the last five years as Hungary’s EU ambassador I am sure you were asked for advice by the Hungarian government. I would like to know why the Hungarian government is so interested, even obsessed, with having this particular enlargement dossier.”

He replied, “This is a very tricky question as I am here to represent myself and not the Hungarian government. But a Hungarian citizen can, I believe, bring a special knowledge [of enlargement] to this portfolio.”

He added, “My experience is that the interests of the EU are built on the interests of Member States. The art is to find a middle ground, one that is acceptable to all. But I am not afraid to make choices

and I will see to it that the Copenhagen criteria [the rules that define whether a country is eligible to join the European Union] is fully respected throughout all accession countries.”

If approved, he said his aim “is to deliver fully-fledged democracy in the Western Balkans with checks and balances. Rest assured these are the principles I will pursue with access states.”

On possible Turkish accession, he said, “We need to insist on our concerns, be it media freedom, attacks on civil society or rule of law, not just in the accession context but the wider context. But we must take a balanced view because dialogue with Turkey is important.”

He said, “It is imperative that we sustain and accelerate progress in the next five years, through a merit-based assessment of each candidate country, keeping a credible perspective on future accession for the Western Balkan countries.”

“I would like to know why the Hungarian government is so interested, even obsessed, with having this particular enlargement dossier” **Kati Piri MEP**

He cited the recent 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall as a personal inspiration, saying this had “opened the way for reunification of Europe.”

He added, “Leaders in Germany and the EU were brave to take this step even though, at the time, many had doubts. History proved them wrong.”

“However, we are not yet at the end of the road and we still need to continue spreading democracy and rule of law to Central Europe and the Western Balkans. We should not miss this historic opportunity.”

About the author

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