

Opening Speech by VP Kallas to the seminar organised by the OLAF anti-fraud communicators network in Vienna-Bratislava on 24-26 September 2007

Fraud with the EU budget :facts and fictions

First of all I would like to express my regret at not being able to attend the conference in person, which was made impossible by my busy agenda. It is my pleasure to be able to address some thoughts to the participants of this seminar "fight against fraud on vision".

To many citizens what happens in Brussels sometimes seems unreal. Accordingly, myths and stories abound. This is in particular the case in the area of fraud and corruption, where the interesting combination of money and crime always is a powerful mixture to send the fantasy spinning.

Brussels the swamp of corruption, the EU the gravy train for greedy fraudsters of all kinds; non –existing olive trees, and milk powder that is imported and exported for years on end. Who has not seen those headlines!

We at the European Commission are constantly fighting to prevent any fraud and irregularity, but also to convince the public that our systems are reliable and sound. It is crucial to gain the citizens trust for the European project.

The Commission is in charge of spending the more than 120 billion euro annually of EU budget. We constantly adjust controls, investigate thoroughly and cooperate in this with the national finance and fraud services – you all are everyday actively involved in this joint commitment!

The Commission makes a great effort to be fully transparent on what is done with the European taxpayers' money and what is achieved. For instance, from next year on, the beneficiaries of EU funds will be published on the internet.

In the prevention and fight against fraud, communication and awareness are central tools. Because it is the money of all citizens and because it is spent across the Union and the globe, fighting of fraud needs to go beyond Brussels and the national administration.

And indeed: this seminar has set out to discuss how the ingredients of money and crime could be packaged into fictional television products to bring the EU' anti-fraud efforts closer to citizens.

TV is the most powerful media in our present society. Television drama productions have the ability to capture the imagination of millions, often more so if the drama is a series and is therefore regular viewing. Though the stories are fiction, the dramatisation is drawn from real experiences, making use of the guidance of the investigating agency. It therefore becomes a collaborative project where both parties can benefit.

It is very innovative to explore whether the existing good national experiences can be replicated in the wider EU context to prevent fraud and to reduce the distance between Europe and citizens, communicating to an audience of some millions the effort made by European Institutions and EU Member States to fight against EU fraud.

To this end this seminar brings together experts from all sides, to share and learn from the experiences which some national television and national anti-fraud agencies already have in this field. It will be very important for the Commission to know what have been the challenges, the difficulties, and the practical solutions.

This could be a good contribution of ideas and experience to see how the complex technicalities of EU spending can be explained to a broad public and how the joint efforts of European and national fraud busters can be made more visible. There is, I am sure, no shortage of material and true stories that would be truly incredible if they hadn't actually happened!

With this I would like to thank the OLAF Anti-fraud Communicators Network and its members and our Austrian and Slovak hosts for making this event happen. The network has often proved a very useful multiplier, for our annual reports or customs operations, and this seminar is exploring new ways of co-operation .

I wish you success and am looking forward with great curiosity and expectation to the outcome.