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**Anti-fraud Communicators Network
(OAFCN)**

Training Seminar of OLAF

Bukarest, 20 October 2003

Your Excellency, Mr President,

Mrs Theato,

Mr. Ponta,

Mr Butticé,

Members of the OLAF Anti-fraud Communicators Network,

Ladies and gentlemen,

As member of the European Commission responsible for Budget I would firstly like to thank the Romanian authorities for hosting this seminar.

Secondly, I would like to stress how important it is that such a seminar is taking place in a candidate country to the EU. This signal cannot be overestimated.

It is a signal of the host country how seriously it takes fraud problems and the fight against fraud.

It is a signal that problems of fraud with public money are not hidden whether the fraudsters are private persons or officials but that we fight against them and make public when fraud has been discovered.

We are at the eve of the first wave of accession to the EU of countries from Middle and Eastern Europe. For Romania we will increase our support – including the EU's financial support – for achieving the aim that the country can join the Union in 2007. For the years 2004-2006 support of around 3 billion Euro for the 3 years can be committed.

For the time after 2006 the European Commission is working on the preparation for the next financial planning period. In my calculations as Budget Commissioner from 2007 onwards I am dealing with an EU of 27 Member States, that means including Romania. This is of course not to be seen as a guarantee for the country but as a strong encouragement.

Fraud is an international problem and a growing problem, we shouldn't be blind to this fact. All should be aware about how dangerous fraud is – both in terms of money lost and in terms of damage to the credibility of public authorities.

This seminar is in order to learn how we can share information which we communicate to the public to let them know what fraud is, how dangerous fraud can be and what we are doing together to tackle the problem.

On the EU level the Union has OLAF as a strong instrument to fight against fraud. Although established inside the Commission OLAF has full independence in its investigations including the independence to decide when and if it brings a case to the national judicial authorities. There should be no and there is no political influence by the Commission in the investigations including the internal investigations against officials.

As it is in the Member State the European Commission makes the experience that the detection of irregularities is not taken by the press and public to be evidence of operating controls but rather as evidence of the existence of fraud. More specifically, a public authority whether on EU level or in a Member State or Candidate country whose effective controls show up irregularities is seen as riddled with fraud while in the others who do not publish irregularities nobody speaks about them. That is hardly an incentive to be frank in communication.

It is as in ancient times, that the bearer of bad news is often punished. This is in particular heavy to bear for a government or public authority if – as it was in the Eurostat case – the wrong doing took place in the past, before the current Commission came into office.

Also for a Candidate Country the challenge and the risk is high to communicate in public on fraud in particular when EU funds are involved. It may serve wide spread prejudices. But it is a matter of fact that the risk is higher not to tackle fraud issues as they are a risk not only to reputation but to democracy. It is also from this angle that I want to thank you, Mr President, for inaugurating this seminar.

Hiding or a minimalist approach in reporting irregularities and fraud is not an answer. We cannot and should not avoid reporting irregularities. A pro-active strategy calls for disclosure of detected irregularities and engaging in public debate on how to counter fraud.

In tackling fraud we share information at the operational level to investigate crime and tackle criminality. We should also be able to share information which we communicate to the public to increase the impact of what we do and to create permanent professional and personal links between our services. This is why the OLAF Anti-Fraud Communicators Network is important. As the borders across Europe come down it will only be through a co-ordinated European-wide approach that we can successfully fight fraud. This is necessary for the cooperation of administrations as for judicial authorities and for those responsible for communication.

Communicating effectively to the public is not easy as fraud and economic crime are often complex and difficult to explain to general public. Also for this reason, we must continue to work together to raise public awareness for these issues.

One step we have taken is to examine public awareness of fraud issues at the European level and accordingly the Commission has for the first time undertaken an opinion poll in both the Member States and the Candidate Countries to see what the public perception is of these issues.

It is important that we all understand the various aspects of this message: Fraud is a crime, a serious crime – but it can be fought. We can and will fight it on a number of levels, by working together on prevention, by investigation and prosecuting fraudsters, we must continue to work together to raise administration and public awareness for these issues.

In this sense I would like to wish you all the very best for the seminar over the coming days.