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(Insight EU Interview) Joaquin Almunia: Microsoft should learn from Billy Wilder's films By Fernando Heller, dpa

When it comes to doing business by the rules, giants like Microsoft should look at drawing some inspiration from Billy Wilder's films which provide a model of fairplay and transparency, according to European Commission Vicepresident and Competition Commissioner, Joaquin Almunia.

Brussels (dpa Insight EU)- US computer giant Microsoft is under investigation and risks more hefty fines from the European Union because it is suspected of having breached the terms of an antitrust deal it reached with the bloc's executive, the Commission, three years ago.

EU Competition Commissioner, Joaquin Almunia, in an interview with dpa Insight EU, said he wonders how it was possible that Microsoft, a company that the European Commission believed would comply with its commitments, did not do so.

Born in Bilbao, Spain, the 64-year-old Almunia is a film buff, something which he says helps him with his job.

Although "cinema is not like real life," he admits, some Billy Wilder films have a lot in common with competition policies, Almunia told dpa Insight EU.

dpa: What is your main challenge as European Commissioner for Competition?

Almunia: "My task is to be as rigorous as possible in implementing the rules, or in the imposing of fines (against big companies). The challenge is to do that and, at the same time, keep our optimism and sometimes the ironic sense of humour of Wilder's films."

dpa: Where is the link between Wilder's films and your job?

Almunia: "Wilder had a particular sense of humour, of irony, of refinement in dialogues, in creating situations, in solving problems and, at the same time, he was also competing with other directors. His producers were competing with other producers, his films were competing with many other films in the market. That is hard competition".

dpa: Life, like in many movies, is only about competition?

Almunia: "At the end of the day, Billy Wilder knew how to be the best without having the need of eliminating his competitors, without having the need to ruin his competitors. I would recommend Microsoft to see a couple of Billy Wilders' films ... so maybe they could inspire themselves to be as good as he was, and not only to convince

me or the European Commission but for the benefit of their own audience".

dpa: Jack Lemmon or Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot*, Wilder's classic 1959 screwball comedy?

Almunia: "I would take the role of Jack Lemmon. He is one of my favourite actors, as a comedian. The role of Tony Curtis is not made for me. Many people may think that I'm the 'villain' because of my position as commissioner. But this is only about enforcing the law and the rules of competition. I think that many people in the EU did not realize that European laws are as important as national ones. Sometimes, I have the feeling that some citizens think European directives are a kind of 'second class' rules".

dpa: Do you really feel like you are the most powerful man in Brussels? Did you discuss that with your predecessor as Competition Commissioner, Neelie Kroes?

Almunia: "Neelie Kroes told me a lot of things, most of them related to competition cases under investigation. We sat just a few metres away in the Commission Barroso I (when Kroes was in Competition and Almunia in Economic and Financial affairs), so we exchanged a lot of views and opinions. We didn't really speak about power ... but power, I think is something you should be able to digest. Some people can digest it well, while others are not able to do so and need to take antacids".

dpa: Would you miss your job in Brussels?

Almunia: "No I wouldn't miss my job in Brussels and no, I would never go back to Spanish politics. When I was appointed as commissioner in 2004 I knew, from that moment, that this would be my last job in public office. I was convinced of that eight years ago and I still believe it now".

dpa: What frustrations do you have as Commissioner?

Almunia: "Sometimes I feel a bit powerless when I can't prevent a breach of the rules. My main concern is: how can we enforce the rules without having to impose fines, without having to threaten a company, or using our power of determent to do it?"

dpa: What's wrong in the Microsoft case?

Almunia: "In the Microsoft case I still wonder how it was possible that a company that we believed would comply with its commitments did not do so. Why wasn't it able to prevent itself from committing again an infraction, and why were we (the Commission) not able to prevent the company (Microsoft) from breaching the rules again. I say that not only from the point of view of a 'Commission policeman'. The key issue here is that many (companies) say they are in favour of an open market economy, but the ones who claim they defend the principles of a market economy are the ones that breach the rules".

In 2009, Microsoft promised to offer Windows users a choice of web browsers until 2014, giving them an alternative to its own Internet Explorer programme. In return, the Commission dropped an antitrust case. But since February 2011, when the Windows 7 Service Pack 1 (SP1) software update was introduced, the so-called "choice screen" for web browsers disappeared.

An investigation had been opened to confirm the problem, which contradicted Microsoft assurances from a report submitted to the commission in December that it was still complying with the deal.

dpa: Have you ever broken yourself the rules? For example have you ever received a traffic fine?

Almunia: "Yes sometimes I have received traffic fines and I paid them. In more than one occasion for speeding, but I think that I paid all my fines. If there is someone who thinks I did not pay, I would ask them to send me the request to do so with any additional penalties".

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