



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Competition DG

The Director General

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By e-mail and registered mail

**Subject: GESTDEM 2022/3807 – Your request of 4 July 2022 for access to documents pursuant to Regulation (EC) No. 1049/2001 relating to a phone call between EVP Vestager and Minister Le Maire**

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your message of 4 July 2022, registered on 5 July 2022 under GESTDEM number 2022/3807, concerning Executive Vice President Vestager's phone call meeting with France's Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire on Monday 4 July 2022, in which you request access to documents in the Commission's case file in accordance with Regulation (EC) No. 1049/2001<sup>1</sup> ("Regulation 1049/2001").

## **1. DOCUMENTS CONCERNED**

In your message you request access to all documentation (including but not limited to: general communications of any nature, written material of any kind, email correspondences, background papers, briefing papers, transcriptions of meetings, readouts of meetings, summaries of meetings, briefings for meetings, etc) concerning the above mentioned call.

The documents you request access to form part of the case file in a pending State aid investigation under Article 107/108 of the TFEU in which no final decision has yet been adopted by the Commission.

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<sup>1</sup> Regulation (EC) N° 1049/2001 regarding public access to European Parliament, Council and Commission documents, OJ L145 of 31.5.2001, p. 43

Having carefully examined your request in the light of Regulation 1049/2001, I have come to the conclusion that the documents you have requested access to fall under the exceptions of Article 4 of Regulation 1049/2001. Access to these documents, therefore, has to be refused, with the exception provided in Section 4 (*Partial Access*) hereunder. Please find below the detailed assessment as regards the application of the exceptions of Article 4 of Regulation 1049/2001.

## 2. APPLICABLE EXCEPTIONS

As the effects of granting access to documents under Regulation 1049/2001 are *erga omnes*, in the sense that such documents become public, the disclosure of the requested documents at this stage might hurt the protection of lawful interests, as set forth in Article 4 of Regulation 1049/2001. Once access is granted, any potential requester receives access to the documents in question, irrespective of its legal standing, involvement in the competition case or not or other specific interests it may have, as "*the purpose of the regulation is to guarantee access for everyone to public documents and not just access for the requesting party to documents concerning it*".<sup>2</sup>

*Article 4(2), third indent, protection of the purpose of investigations and Article 4(3) protection of the institution's decision making process*

Pursuant to Article 4(2), third indent of Regulation 1049/2001 the Commission shall refuse access to a document where its disclosure would undermine the protection of the purpose of inspections, investigations and audits.

Pursuant to Article 4(3), access to the documents drawn by the Commission or received by the Commission shall be refused if the disclosure of the documents would seriously undermine the Commission's decision making process.

These exceptions aim at protecting the Commission's capacity to ensure that Member States and undertakings comply with their obligation under European Union law. For the effective conduct of pending investigations it is of utmost importance that the Commission's investigative strategy, preliminary assessments of the case and planning of procedural steps remain confidential.

In *TGI*<sup>3</sup>, a case which concerned an access to documents request to all documents in two State aid cases, the Court of Justice upheld the Commission's refusal and held that there exists with regard to the exception related to the protection of the purpose of investigations a general presumption that disclosure of documents in the file would undermine the purpose of State aid investigations. The Court reasoned that this follows from the fact that under the State aid procedural rules the interested parties, other than the Member State concerned, have no right to consult the documents in the administrative file and should such access be granted under Regulation 1049/2001 the nature of the procedure is likely to be modified and thus the system for review of State aid would be called into question<sup>4</sup>. This line of reasoning was upheld by the Court in *Sea Handling v*

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<sup>2</sup> See Joined Cases T-110/03, T-150/03 and T-405/03, *Sison v Council*, paragraph 50; Case T-181/10, *Reagens SpA v Commission*, paragraph 143

<sup>3</sup> See Case C-139/07 P, *Commission v Technische Glaswerke Ilmenau GmbH*

<sup>4</sup> See Case C-139/07 P, *Commission v Technische Glaswerke Ilmenau GmbH*, paragraphs 58-59

*Commission* even when it comes to a reduced number of documents pertaining to a State aid file<sup>5</sup>.

It is noteworthy that in State aid procedures the Commission relies on submissions by the Member State concerned which typically contain sensitive data, including information related to the economic activities of undertakings. It therefore follows that, similarly to *Agrofert*<sup>6</sup>, disclosure of this information in State aid investigations would risk jeopardising the willingness of the Member State to cooperate with the Commission's State aid investigations even after the definitive closure of the case.

The State aid procedural regulations, especially Regulation 2015/1589<sup>7</sup>, contain specific rules regarding treatment of information obtained in the context of such proceedings and allowing public access to it on the basis of Regulation 1049/2001 would, in principle, jeopardise the balance which the Union legislature wished to ensure in State aid procedures between the obligation on Member States to communicate possibly sensitive information (including sensitive commercial information related to undertakings) to the Commission and the guarantee of increased protection in accordance with the State aid procedural regulations. In essence, the State aid procedural regulations and Regulation 1049/2001 have different aims but must be interpreted and applied in a consistent manner. The rules on access to file in the above-mentioned regulations are also designed to ensure observance of professional secrecy and are of the same hierarchical order as Regulation 1049/2001 (so that neither of the two sets of rules prevails over the other).

As mentioned above, the requested documents relate to a State aid investigation and contain information from which the direction of the investigation, the future procedural steps which the Commission may take, as well as its investigative strategy may be revealed to the public. This information could easily be misinterpreted or misrepresented as indications of the Commission's possible final assessment in this case. Such misinterpretations and misrepresentations may cause damage to the reputation and standing of the potential beneficiaries investigated, in particular if no decision is adopted establishing a violation of the competition rules.

The requested documents would reveal the Commission's investigation strategy and their disclosure would therefore undermine the protection of the purpose of the investigation and would also seriously undermine the Commission's decision making process. The Commission's services must be free to explore all possible options in preparation of a decision free from external pressure.

In view of the foregoing, the requested documents are manifestly covered in their entirety by the exception related to the protection of the purpose of the Commission's State aid investigations set out in Article 4(2), third indent of Regulation 1049/2001. Moreover, the internal Commission documents and documents received by the Commission in the file are also covered by the exception related to the protection of the Commission's decision-making process, set out in Article 4(3) of Regulation 1049/2001.

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<sup>5</sup> See Case T-456/13, *Sea Handling SPA v Commission*, paragraphs 55-58 and 61

<sup>6</sup> See Case C-477/10 P, *Commission v Agrofert*, paragraph 66

<sup>7</sup> Council Regulation (EU) 2015/1589 of 13 July 2015 laying down detailed rules for the application of Article 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Text with EEA relevance) OJ L 248 of 24.9.2015, p. 9–29

*Article 4(2), first indent, protection of commercial interests*

Pursuant to Article 4(2), first indent of Regulation 1049/2001 the Commission shall refuse access to a document where disclosure would undermine the protection of commercial interests of a natural or legal person.

Economic entities have a legitimate commercial interest in preventing third parties from obtaining strategic information on their essential, particularly economic interests and on the operation or development of their business. Moreover, the assessments made by the Commission and contained in Commission's documents are commercially sensitive, particularly at a stage where an investigation has not been finally concluded yet.

The documents requested by you, as specified above, are part of the file in a competition case, have not been brought into the public domain and are known only to a limited number of persons. In particular, the documents you request access to contain commercial and market-sensitive information regarding the activities of the potential beneficiaries, whose public disclosure would undermine the latter's commercial interests. This information concerns in particular commercial strategies. Disclosure of these documents could bring serious harm to the undertakings' commercial interests.

In view of the foregoing the requested documents are covered by the exception set out in Article 4(2), first indent of Regulation 1049/2001.

Nonetheless, I am pleased to inform you that DG COMP services carried out an assessment of the case file and identified a section of one of the requested documents, which does not refer to an ongoing state aid investigation, and to which the above general presumption does therefore not apply. This document is enclosed in the annex to this letter.

**3. OVERRIDING PUBLIC INTEREST IN DISCLOSURE**

Pursuant to Article 4(2) and (3) of Regulation 1049/2001, the exception to the right of access contained in that Article must be waived if there is an overriding public interest in disclosing the documents requested. In order for an overriding public interest in disclosure to exist, this interest, firstly, has to be public (as opposed to private interests of the applicant) and, secondly, overriding, *i.e.* in this case it must outweigh the interest protected under Article 4(2), first and third indents, and 4(3) of Regulation 1049/2001.

In your application you have not established arguments that would present an overriding public interest to disclose the documents to which access has been hereby denied. Consequently, the prevailing interest in this case lies in protecting the effectiveness of the Commission's investigations, its decision-making process and the commercial interests of the undertakings concerned.

**4. PARTIAL ACCESS**

I have also considered the possibility of granting partial access to the documents for which access has been denied in accordance with Article 4(6) of Regulation 1049/2001. However, the general presumption of non-disclosure invoked above also applies to partial

disclosure for all the documents concerned and, consequently, no partial access can be granted, with the following exception.

Partial access can be granted to the section “Semiconductors – Chips Act” of the briefing prepared ahead of the call. The other parts of the document are covered by the abovementioned exceptions to the right of access to file and are thus blanked out.

## **5. MEANS OF REDRESS**

If you want this position to be reviewed you should write to the Commission's Secretary-General at the address below, confirming your initial request. You have fifteen (15) working days in which to do so from receipt of this reply after which your initial request will be deemed to have been withdrawn.

The Secretary-General will inform you of the result of this review within fifteen (15) working days from the registration of your request, either granting you access to the documents or confirming the refusal. In the latter case, you will be informed of how you can take further action.

All correspondence should be sent to the following address:

European Commission  
Secretariat-General  
Transparency, Document Management & Access to Documents (SG.C.1)  
BERL 7/076  
B-1049 Bruxelles

or by email to: [sg-acc-doc@ec.europa.eu](mailto:sg-acc-doc@ec.europa.eu).

Yours faithfully,

Electronically signed

Olivier GUERSENT

Enclosure: briefing document indicated above.