

V

(Anunțuri)

PROCEDURI REFERITOARE LA PUNEREA ÎN APLICARE A POLITICII ÎN
DOMENIUL CONCURENȚEI

COMISIA EUROPEANĂ

AJUTOR DE STAT – SLOVENIA

**Ajutor de stat SA.33229 2018/C (ex 2017/N-3) – Modificări ale angajamentelor de restructurare ale
Nova Ljubljanska Banka d.d.**

**Invitație de a prezenta observații în temeiul articolului 108 alineatul (2) din Tratatul privind
funcționarea Uniunii Europene**

(Text cu relevanță pentru SEE)

(2018/C 121/03)

Prin scrisoarea din data de 26 ianuarie 2018, reprodusă în versiunea lingvistică autentică în paginile care urmează acestui rezumat, Comisia a comunicat Sloveniei decizia sa de a iniția procedura prevăzută la articolul 108 alineatul (2) din TFUE privind măsura menționată anterior.

Părțile interesate își pot prezenta observațiile privind măsura pentru care Comisia inițiază procedura în termen de o lună de la data publicării prezentului rezumat și a scrisorii de mai jos, la adresa:

European Commission
Directorate-General for Competition
State Aid Greffe
B-1049 Bruxelles
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Aceste observații vor fi comunicate Sloveniei. Păstrarea confidențialității în ceea ce privește identitatea părții interesate care prezintă observațiile poate fi solicitată în scris, precizându-se motivele care stau la baza solicitării.

DESCRIEREA MĂSURILOR

Prin decizia din 18 decembrie 2013, Comisia a declarat compatibile cu piața internă următoarele măsuri de ajutor de stat în favoarea Nova Ljubljanska Banka (NLB):

- (i) o primă recapitalizare în valoare de 250 de milioane EUR, aprobată temporar în decizia de salvare din 7 martie 2011;
- (ii) o a doua recapitalizare în valoare de 383 de milioane EUR, aprobată temporar în decizia din 2 iulie 2012 privind a doua salvare și inițierea procedurii;
- (iii) o a treia recapitalizare în valoare de 1 558 de milioane EUR și
- (iv) un transfer de active depreciate către un vehicul de gestionare a activelor deținut de stat, cu un element de ajutor implicit în valoare de 130 de milioane EUR.

Comisia a declarat măsurile ca fiind compatibile cu piața internă pe baza planului de restructurare și a listei de angajamente prezentate de autoritățile slovene. O parte dintre angajamente erau necesare pentru a restabili viabilitatea băncii. Astfel, când a evaluat planul final de restructurare al NLB, Comisia a reamintit că avea „îndoieli că procesul decizional în cadrul [NLB] (în special pentru acordarea de noi credite și restructurarea celor existente) ar corespunde normelor de piață, precum și îndoieli cu privire la posibile probleme de guvernanta corporativă legate de intervenția statului, în calitate de principal acționar al băncii, în activitatea zilnică a NLB”. Comisia a subliniat că unul dintre aspectele pe care planul de restructurare trebuia să le abordeze era necesitatea ca, în viitor, „statul să nu influențeze activitatea zilnică a NLB.”

Concluzia pozitivă a Comisiei cu privire la viabilitatea pe termen lung a băncii a ținut seama de o serie de angajamente care îmbunătățeau politica de gestionare a riscurilor și politica de creditare a NLB și consolidau guvernanta sa corporativă. Evaluarea viabilității efectuată de Comisie a fost bazată în mare măsură și pe angajamentul Sloveniei de a vinde 75 % – 1 din acțiunile NLB cel târziu până la 31 decembrie 2017 sau, alternativ, de a propune, până la 30 noiembrie 2017, un mandatar însărcinat cu cesionarea, căruia să-i acorde mandatul de a cesiona filialele străine ale NLB din Balcani.

De asemenea, decizia din 2013 a concluzionat că perioada de restructurare a NLB urma să dureze până la sfârșitul anului 2017, iar o serie de angajamente de restructurare erau legate de sfârșitul perioadei de restructurare.

La 13 aprilie 2017, Slovenia a notificat angajamente modificate: cel puțin 50 % din acțiunile NLB vor fi vândute înainte de sfârșitul anului 2017, iar restul (mai exact toate acțiunile în afară de o minoritate de blocare de 25 % + 1) până la sfârșitul anului 2018. Angajamentul de cesionare (în cazul în care Slovenia nu ar reuși să vândă la timp 50 % din acțiunile băncii) continua să facă parte din angajamente. Prin decizia din 11 mai 2017, Comisia a concluzionat că angajamentele modificate asigurau în continuare compatibilitatea cu piața internă a ajutorului acordat NLB.

La 8 iunie 2017, autoritățile slovene au decis în mod unilateral să suspende vânzarea acțiunilor NLB.

În prezent, Comisia observă că termenul pentru vânzarea a 50 % din acțiunile NLB, și anume 31 decembrie 2017, a expirat. În plus, Slovenia nu a propus un mandatar însărcinat cu cesionarea pentru vânzarea filialelor străine din Balcani ale NLB până la 30 noiembrie 2017.

La 21 decembrie 2017, autoritățile slovene au notificat oficial angajamentele modificate în raport cu decizia de restructurare din 2013:

- Slovenia și-a notificat intenția de a lansa cesiunea participației sale în NLB până la nivelul de 25 % + 1 în 2018 și de a o finaliza în 2019;
- pentru a asigura Comisia că guvernanta corporativă a NLB nu va fi afectată de intervenția statului în activitatea zilnică a acesteia, autoritățile slovene propun numirea unui mandatar independent (*blind trustee*);
- Slovenia propune, de asemenea, ca toate angajamentele stabilite în decizia din 2013 (astfel cum a fost modificată prin decizia de modificare din 2017) să înceteze să se mai aplice de la 31 decembrie 2017 (cu excepția angajamentului de vânzare menționat anterior).

EVALUAREA MĂSURILOR

În decizia sa din 18 decembrie 2013, Comisia a concluzionat deja că măsurile descrise la punctele (i)-(iv) de mai sus reprezintă ajutor de stat. Această evaluare rămâne neschimbată. În decizia respectivă, Comisia a concluzionat, de asemenea, că măsurile de ajutor de stat în favoarea NLB erau compatibile cu piața internă, întrucât erau necesare în vederea remedierii unei perturbări grave a economiei slovene în sensul articolului 107 alineatul (3) litera (b) din TFUE. Comisia a concluzionat că planul de restructurare și angajamentele de restructurare aferente ar permite NLB să revină la viabilitate, abordând în același timp în mod suficient chestiunile legate de repartizarea sarcinii și de concurență. Comisia a confirmat această analiză a compatibilității în decizia de modificare din 11 mai 2017, pe baza angajamentelor modificate.

În prezent, Comisia observă că cel puțin un angajament de restructurare important nu a fost respectat, mai exact a fost depășit termenul-limită pentru a vinde 50 % din acțiunile NLB, 31 decembrie 2017. În plus, Slovenia nu a propus un mandatar însărcinat cu cesionarea pentru vânzarea filialelor străine din Balcani ale NLB până la 30 noiembrie 2017.

Comisia observă că o decizie de restructurare poate fi modificată în cazul în care modificarea se bazează pe noi angajamente care pot fi considerate echivalente cu cele prevăzute inițial. În acest caz, măsurile de ajutor existente ar rămâne compatibile în temeiul articolului 107 alineatul (3) litera (b) din TFUE dacă echilibrul general al deciziei inițiale nu ar fi afectat. Pentru a menține echilibrul inițial, angajamentele modificate nu ar trebui să afecteze negativ viabilitatea beneficiarului ajutorului, întregul set de angajamente rămânând echivalent în ceea ce privește repartizarea sarcinii și măsurile compensatorii, ținând seama de cerințele din Comunicarea privind restructurarea.

În cazul de față, Comisia are îndoieli serioase că angajamentele modificate pe care le-a notificat Slovenia sunt echivalente cu angajamentele autorizate în decizia Comisiei din 18 decembrie 2013 și în decizia de modificare din 11 mai 2017.

În primul rând, Comisia reamintește că secțiunea privind viabilitatea din decizia Comisiei din 18 decembrie 2013 s-a bazat într-o măsură decisivă pe schimbarea structurii de proprietate a NLB. Astfel, în 2013 autoritățile slovene se angajaseră să elimine influența statului asupra operațiunilor de zi cu zi ale NLB. Cu toate acestea, având în vedere angajamentele modificate notificate de Slovenia, Comisia are îndoieli serioase că viabilitatea pe termen lung a NLB poate fi asigurată în lipsa unei astfel de schimbări de proprietate.

În plus, în ciuda rolului important jucat în trecut de slaba guvernare corporativă, Comisia observă că, în perioada de restructurare, autoritățile slovene nu au demonstrat convingător că aceste probleme au fost abordate în mod eficace. În această privință, Comisia amintește rata de rotație ridicată din cadrul consiliului de supraveghere al băncii în ultimii ani.

În al doilea rând, în ceea ce privește propunerea Sloveniei de a numi un mandatar independent (*blind trustee*), Comisia are îndoieli cu privire la faptul că acesta ar putea soluționa problemele de viabilitate ale NLB în aceeași măsură ca o schimbare permanentă de proprietate. În acest context, Comisia observă că o schimbare de proprietate ar determina o evoluție la toate nivelurile băncii în direcția unui comportament de maximizare a valorii.

În fine, Comisia observă, de asemenea, că există un număr important de probleme practice legate de numirea mandatarului independent. Selectarea și numirea unui astfel de mandatar pare a fi un proces care necesită mult timp. De asemenea, este discutabil dacă un mandatar independent care ar putea fi destituit de autoritățile slovene în cazul în care nu își exercită sarcinile în funcție de interesul Sloveniei în calitate de acționar ar avea cu adevărat independența necesară. În plus, pentru o astfel de numire este nevoie de o serie de aprobări reglementare, prin urmare Slovenia nici nu este în măsură să ofere un angajament ferm că va fi numit un mandatar independent. În orice caz, mandatarul independent nu fusese încă numit la 1 ianuarie 2018 (și anume imediat după expirarea termenului-limită pentru vânzarea acțiunilor, 31 decembrie 2017), ceea ce implică, în mod inevitabil, că va exista un interval de timp în care acțiunile întreprinderii nu vor fi vândute și aceasta nu va fi nici controlată de un mandatar independent.

Pe baza celor de mai sus, Comisia are îndoieli serioase că propunerea unui mandatar independent este echivalentă cu angajamentul de vânzare. În plus, având în vedere importanța angajamentului de vânzare, pare foarte dificil de găsit o măsură care să fie cu adevărat echivalentă.

De asemenea, Comisia a ajuns la concluzia preliminară că termenul pentru vânzarea acțiunilor prelungește *de facto* perioada de restructurare, care ar fi trebuit să se încheie la 31 decembrie 2017. Ca observație generală, Comisia amintește că, în orice caz, perioada de restructurare ar trebui să fie cât mai scurtă cu putință.

Întrucât o serie de angajamente erau legate logic de perioada de restructurare, la o primă examinare Comisia consideră că prelungirea termenului pentru vânzarea acțiunilor ar trebui însoțită de prelungirea altor angajamente de restructurare. Trebuie remarcat că NLB va fi activă pe piață pentru o perioadă mai lungă fără ca viabilitatea pe termen lung a acesteia să fie pe deplin asigurată. Acest lucru ar putea determina denaturări ale concurenței, afectând în mod nejustificat concurenții care nu beneficiază de ajutor sau pe cei care primesc ajutor și respectă în mod riguros planul și angajamentele de restructurare. Prin urmare, pentru a menține echilibrul dintre angajamentele existente, Comisia consideră că autoritățile slovene ar trebui să prezinte măsuri suplimentare pentru a compensa întârzierea procesului de restructurare. În acest stadiu, Comisia are îndoieli cu privire la faptul că Slovenia a propus măsuri care să compenseze suficient această întârziere generală a procesului de restructurare. Comisia se întreabă dacă Slovenia nu ar putea îmbunătăți suplimentar viabilitatea NLB printr-o reducere considerabilă a termenelor de cesionare, prin alte modificări ale procesului de vânzare și/sau prin transformarea mandatului independent într-un mandat însărcinat cu cesionarea care să aibă capacitate deplină. De asemenea, Comisia se întreabă dacă Slovenia nu ar trebui să ia în considerare luarea de măsuri structurale suplimentare pentru NLB, precum cesionarea anumitor filiale, restricțiile privind activitățile noi și/sau alte măsuri comportamentale.

TEXTUL SCRISORII

The Commission wishes to inform Slovenia that, having examined the information supplied by your authorities on the measures referred to above, it has decided to initiate the procedure laid down in Article 108(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (‘TFEU’).

1. PROCEDURE

- (1) On 14 January 2011, the Slovenian authorities notified a EUR 250 million State recapitalisation of Nova Ljubljanska Banka d.d. (‘NLB’ or ‘the Bank’). By decision of 7 March 2011 ⁽¹⁾ (‘first rescue decision’), the Commission authorised a first recapitalisation aid in favour of NLB for a period of six months and upon the submission of a restructuring plan. By decision of 2 July 2012 ⁽²⁾ (‘the second rescue and opening decision’), the Commission approved the second recapitalisation of NLB and at the same time opened an in-depth investigation raising doubts regarding the ability of the Bank to return to viability and the provision of sufficient burden-sharing and measures limiting distortions of competition based on the restructuring plan which had been submitted to it.
- (2) By decision of 18 December 2013 (‘the 2013 Decision’) ⁽³⁾, the Commission approved State aid to NLB on the basis of a restructuring plan and a list of commitments from the Slovenian authorities. Slovenia committed for instance to sell 75 %-1 share of NLB by 31 December 2017 at the latest (‘the sale commitment’) or alternatively to divest NLB’s foreign subsidiaries in the Balkans (‘the divestment commitment’).
- (3) On 13 April 2017, Slovenia notified amended commitments, inter alia, to make the sale of the shares of NLB more gradual. On 11 May 2017, the Commission concluded that those amended commitments still ensured the compatibility of the aid granted to NLB with the internal market (‘the 2017 Amendment Decision’) ⁽⁴⁾.
- (4) On 8 June 2017 ⁽⁵⁾, the Slovenian authorities decided to put the sale of shares of NLB on hold. On 9 June 2017, the Slovenian Minister of Finance informed the Commission by phone of that decision.
- (5) On 20 September 2017, the Slovenian authorities submitted a non-paper proposing to first sort out an ongoing litigation in Croatia vis-à-vis NLB and the old Ljubljanska Banka (see recital (31) below) before proceeding with the sale of shares of NLB.
- (6) On 6 November 2017, the Slovenian authorities submitted another non-paper proposing to set up an NLB-financed fund, which competitors of NLB could use to finance SMEs with a weak capital position.
- (7) On 21 November 2017, Slovenia submitted another non-paper proposing to appoint an independent ‘blind trustee’ in the management board of NLB until 75 %-1 share of NLB would be sold. The Slovenian authorities and the Commission discussed these non-papers several times.
- (8) On 21 December 2017, the Slovenian authorities formally notified the amended commitments which are described in recitals (41) and (43).
- (9) By letter dated 21 December 2017, Slovenia agreed exceptionally to waive its rights deriving from Article 342 TFEU in conjunction with Article 3 of Regulation 1/1958 ⁽⁶⁾ and to have the present decision adopted and notified in English.

2. FACTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Description of the beneficiary

- (10) A detailed description of NLB can be found in recitals (11) to (22) of the 2013 Decision.

⁽¹⁾ Commission Decision in Case SA.32261 (2011/N) — Slovenia — Rescue recapitalisation in favour of NLB, OJ C 189, 29.6.2011, p. 2.

⁽²⁾ Commission Decision in Case SA.34937 (2012/C) (ex 2012/N) and SA.33229 (2012/C) (ex 2011/N) — Second recapitalisation of NLB and Restructuring of NLB, OJ C 361, 22.11.2012, p. 18.

⁽³⁾ Commission Decision in case SA.33229 (2012/C) (ex 2011/N) — Slovenia — Restructuring of NLB, OJ, L 246, 21.08.2014, p. 28.

⁽⁴⁾ Commission Decision in case SA.33229 (2017/N-2) — Slovenia — Amendment of the restructuring decision of NLB, OJ C 254, 11.07.2017, p. 2.

⁽⁵⁾ See the following press release: http://www.vlada.si/en/media_room/government_press_releases/press_release/article/138_regular_government_session_government_rejects_minimum_offer_price_for_nlb_59951/

⁽⁶⁾ Regulation No 1 determining the languages to be used by the European Economic Community, OJ 17, 6.10.1958, p. 385.

- (11) At the end of September 2017 ⁽⁷⁾, the Bank reported total assets and risk weighted assets ('RWA') of respectively EUR 12 billion and EUR 8.1 billion. In the first nine months of 2017, NLB realised an after-tax profit of EUR 184 million, up from EUR 92 million in the same period of 2016. This profit translated into an (annualised) return on equity ('RoE') after tax of 15.9 %.
- (12) At the end of September 2017 NLB's non-performing exposures ratio still amounts to 8.3 %, down from 10 % at the end of December 2016 and its core equity tier 1 ratio was 16.3 % ⁽⁸⁾, ⁽⁹⁾. After the burden sharing of subordinated debt instruments in 2012/2013, NLB has not yet issued new subordinated debt. At the end of September 2017, deposits represent more than 90 % of funding and the loan-to-deposit ratio amounted to 72 %.
- (13) NLB still owns foreign subsidiaries in the Balkans, which represent in total EUR 3.8 billion in assets and EUR 82.7 million in after-tax profit ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Table 1

Key financial figures of NLB's foreign subsidiaries in the Balkans

	FYRoM	Bosnia subsidiary 1	Bosnia subsidiary 2	Kosovo	Montenegro	Serbia
NLB stake %	87 %	100 %	97 %	81 %	99 %	100 %
Market share	15.8 %	18.6 %	5.4 %	15 %	11.9 %	1.3 %
Profit after tax (EUR million)	38.0	20.1	5.3	11.0	4.2	4.1
Total assets (EUR million)	1 167	674	525	553	486	343

- (14) Furthermore, NLB has a stake in insurance company NLB Vita which, when publishing results for the first nine months of 2017, had total assets of EUR 452 million and a result after tax of EUR 4.8 million. By monitoring report of 30 November 2017, the Monitoring Trustee informed the Commission that NLB was still actively involved in leasing in 2017 through its leasing subsidiary ⁽¹¹⁾. The liquidation of this leasing subsidiary was approved at the end of 2017. NLB has now also approved the establishment of a new leasing company in the beginning of 2018.
- (15) The ownership structure of NLB has undergone several changes in the past years. In 2002, the Belgian bank KBC acquired 34 % of NLB ⁽¹²⁾ and KBC and the Slovenian State signed a shareholders' agreement guaranteeing KBC seats in NLB's management and supervisory boards ⁽¹³⁾. In that shareholder agreement, KBC undertook not to increase its investment until the end of 2005. However, when in 2006 KBC was not able to increase its stake in NLB, KBC decided to no longer consider its existing stake as strategic in nature but recategorised it as a financial participation. KBC completely exited NLB in 2013 ⁽¹⁴⁾. As of end 2013, the Slovenian State has become again the 100 % owner of NLB, thereby turning back NLB's (partial) privatisation of 2001/2002.

⁽⁷⁾ Financial figures mentioned in recitals (11) and (12) are based on the consolidated financial statements of the Bank as available on: <https://www.nlb.si/nlb/nlb-portal/eng/investor-relations/financial-reports/prezentacija-nlb-3q2017.pdf>

⁽⁸⁾ As a result of the ECB's [...] applicable SREP decision ('Supervisory Review and Evaluation Process') of the ECB, NLB has to comply with a total capital ratio of 12.75 % (which consists of Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 requirements and also the capital conservation buffer of 1.25 %).

⁽⁹⁾ [...] a commitment of the 2013 Decision ('the capital repayment mechanism'), which obliges NLB to repay for the fiscal year 2017 the lower of (i) 100 % of the excess capital above the applicable minimum capital requirement on the consolidated level under European and Slovenian law (including Pillars 1 and 2) plus a buffer of 100 basis points or (ii) the net income of the relevant year.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Source data: see link footnote 7.

⁽¹¹⁾ The leasing subsidiary of NLB in Slovenia was included in the list of non-core subsidiaries to be divested, as mentioned in commitment 4 of the 2013 Decision.

⁽¹²⁾ That 2001/2002 privatisation process of NLB was also described in the regular reports (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002) from the Commission on Slovenia's progress towards accession. On page 37-38 of its 2002 report, the Commission noted that: 'In May 2001, after long delays, the government adopted a privatisation programme to sell NLB and NKBM. ... The privatisation was launched in September 2001 and although there has been interest from various renowned foreign strategic investors, the government interrupted the privatisation process of NKBM and the sale was halted as political resistance increased and conditions were judged to be unsatisfactory. The government still intends to sell NKBM, but it is not yet clear when and under what conditions. The privatisation of NLB went ahead but under altered conditions introduced by the government during the privatisation process, causing one of the foreign bidders to withdraw.'

⁽¹³⁾ <https://www.nlb.si/kbc-nv-belgium-now-a-key-shareholder-in-nova-lj>

⁽¹⁴⁾ The transaction to exit NLB was signed in 2012. Completion of the agreement was finalised after the approval of the Slovenian competition authority obtained in March 2013. See the following press release: https://www.kbc.com/fr/system/files/doc/about-us/2012_Sale_NLB_en.pdf

2.2. State aid measures in favour of NLB

- (16) By means of the 2013 Decision and based on the commitments offered by Slovenia, the Commission declared the following State aid measures in favour of NLB compatible with the internal market:
- (i) a first recapitalisation of EUR 250 million, temporarily approved in the first rescue decision;
 - (ii) a second recapitalisation of EUR 383 million, temporarily approved in the second rescue and opening decision;
 - (iii) a third recapitalisation of EUR 1 558 million; and
 - (iv) a transfer of impaired assets to a State-owned bad bank with an implied aid element of EUR 130 million ⁽¹⁵⁾.
- (17) In total, NLB received State aid of EUR 2 321 million equivalent to 20 % of its RWA as of December 2012.

2.3. The commitments in the 2013 Decision

- (18) When assessing the final restructuring plan, the Commission recalled in recital (76) of the 2013 Decision that in the formal investigation procedure it had 'raised doubts whether the decision-making process in NLB was in line with market norms and in particular about possible corporate governance issues related to the intervention of the State as main shareholder ⁽¹⁶⁾ into the day-to-day business of NLB'. In recital (126) and (127) of that Decision, the Commission repeated that one of the issues that the restructuring plan had to address was that 'the State would not influence NLB's day-to-day business.'
- (19) In order to be able to establish the long-term viability of the Bank, the Commission took into account a number of commitments which improved NLB's risk management and credit policies. Commitment (10.1) for instance ensures that NLB would price its loans based on a pricing policy establishing a minimum RoE for all its loans ('the RoE commitment'). This commitment limited the possibility for the Bank to lend at rates which a prudent market investor would not accept (for instance as a result of external influences). An analogous commitment (i.e. commitment (10.3)) ensured that NLB would behave in a market conform manner when restructuring loans.
- (20) Other commitments in the 2013 Decision which relate to corporate governance include the following:
- '(9.5) all members of the supervisory board shall pass the "fit and proper test", i.e. they shall be reliable and avail of the necessary professional skills to properly assess and monitor NLB's business. Slovenia will not intervene in the appointment of supervisory board members and executives over and above its own nominees and its shareholder rights under ordinary Slovenian corporate law;
 - (9.6) two thirds of the seats and voting rights on the supervisory board and its committees shall be allocated to independent experts, i.e. persons who are neither currently employed nor have been employed 24 months prior to their appointment by the Slovenian government and who do not currently hold nor have held 24 months prior to their appointment a leadership or managing function within a Slovenian political party; [...]
 - (9.8) NLB will follow a prudent, sound business policy geared towards sustainability while implementing the planned measures. NLB will further review its internal incentive schemes and remuneration policy and take steps to ensure that they do not encourage unreasonable risk-taking, that they are geared towards long-term and sustainable goals, and are transparent. The remuneration of board members and leading employees of the Bank shall particularly take into account the relevant person's contribution to the Bank's economic position and the necessity of market-oriented salary levels so as to be able to employ particularly suitable individuals who can achieve a sustainable business development. NLB's remuneration policies and practices will be compliant with the European Banking Authority's "Guidelines on Remuneration Policies and Practices" published on 10 December 2010. The variable annual remuneration will be limited as follows:
 - (a) management board: five monthly salaries;

⁽¹⁵⁾ The difference between the transfer price (EUR 617 million) and the market value (EUR 486 million) of the impaired assets.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Also other international institutions have established a clear link between the Bank's problems in 2012/2013 and corporate governance issues and the related desirability of a privatisation. The IMF 2017 Article IV report reads for instance as follows: "The privatization of the two remaining large state banks is of key importance to ensure that they continue to operate on commercial principles, expand into new activities, and reduce costs. This is especially important given the history of connected lending practices that prevailed in Slovenian state-owned banks prior to the 2012/13 crisis. After the sale of NKBM in 2016, the authorities are preparing to privatize the largest bank (NLB) via an Initial Public Offering ("IPO") in 2017. Staff supported the sale but expressed concern about the restriction that no private investor can have more than the state's 25 percent stake. Dropping the restriction would allow strategic investors to take a controlling stake and further improve the bank's performance." (International Monetary Fund's country report no. 17/125, May 2017, 2017 Article IV consultation — press release; staff report, available on: <https://www.imf.org/~media/Files/.../CR/2017/cr17125.ashx>)

(b) employees performing special work ⁽¹⁷⁾ employed in the front office function: five monthly salaries;

(c) employees performing special work employed in other functions: three monthly salaries.

The payment of at least 50 % of the variable remuneration will be deferred over the period of three years.

(9.9) Notwithstanding the commitment of paragraph 9.8 above, in any case, for the whole restructuring period, the total remuneration to any board member and employee performing special work will be restricted to an appropriate level. The total remuneration of any such individual will not exceed 15 times the national average salary in Slovenia or 10 times the average salary of NLB. The restrictions referred to above will continue to apply until the end of the restructuring period.

(9.10) Slovenia will ensure that each state-owned bank shall remain a separate economic unit with independent powers of decision within the meaning of the EC Merger Regulation and the Jurisdictional Notice.¹

(21) Finally, the Commission in its viability assessment also crucially relied on the fact that Slovenia committed to partially sell the shares of NLB ⁽¹⁸⁾, in line with existing case practice and case law ⁽¹⁹⁾, ⁽²⁰⁾.

(22) Concretely, Slovenia provided the Commission with the commitment that it would reduce its shareholding in NLB to 25 % plus one share ('Blocking Minority') by 31 December 2017. If Slovenia had not entered into (a) binding sale and purchase agreement(s) for the sale of its shareholding in NLB exceeding the Blocking Minority by 31 December 2017, Slovenia and NLB should grant to the Divestiture Trustee (appointed in accordance with paragraph 19) an exclusive mandate to sell NLB's participations in the following banking subsidiaries, for a minimum price not lower than [...]: NLB banka, Belgrade (Republic of Serbia), NLB Montenegrobanka, Podgorica (Republic of Montenegro), NLB Prishtina, Prishtina (Republic of Kosovo), NLB Razvojna banka, Banja Luka (Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina), NLB Tutunska banka, Skopje (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), NLB Banka, Tuzla (Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina). The sale process would be conducted by the Divestiture Trustee appointed in accordance with paragraph 19 of the commitment catalogue.

(23) The abovementioned paragraph 19 provided that Slovenia at the latest on 30 November 2017 ⁽²¹⁾ had to propose to the Commission for approval a list of one or more potential divestiture trustees who would then be empowered to divest the Balkan subsidiaries thereby triggering an ownership change for those subsidiaries.

(24) A number of the commitments related to divestments or sales of activities have meanwhile been implemented ⁽²²⁾. However, other commitments are still monitored closely by the Commission with the help of a monitoring trustee:

— reduction of the balance sheet (commitment 1)

— reduction of costs (commitment 2)

— reduction of credit business in certain sectors (commitment 7)

— business with foreign clients (commitment 8)

— no positive discrimination of State owned companies (commitment 11)

— behavioural measures such as an aggressive behaviour ban (commitment (12.1); a capital repayment mechanism/dividend ban (commitment (12.2) and an acquisition ban (commitment 12.4))

— conditions for recapitalising subsidiaries (if needed) (commitment 16)

(25) The 2013 Decision explains that NLB's restructuring period will last until end 2017 and links a number of measures to the end of the restructuring period.

⁽¹⁷⁾ As defined in the commitment catalogue

⁽¹⁸⁾ Commitment 14 of the 2013 Decision

⁽¹⁹⁾ See for instance the following Commission Decisions: (a) Decision of 12 May 2009 in case C 43/2008 — Germany — Restructuring of West LB AG, OJ L 345, 23.12.2009, p. 1; (b) Decision of 20 December 2012 in case SA. 35490 — Spain — Restructuring of Liber bank, OJ C 96, 4.4.2013, p. 7; (c) Decision of 12 December 2012 in case SA.34536 — Spain — Restructuring and recapitalisation of Banco CEISS, OJ C 96, 4.4.2013, p. 1; (d) Decision of 20 December 2012 in case SA.35488 — Spain — Restructuring of Banco Mare Nostrum, OJ C 96, 4.4.2013, p. 6.

⁽²⁰⁾ In case T-457/09 *Westfälisch-Lippischer Sparkassen- und Giroverband v Commission*, ECLI:EU:T:2014:683, para. 391, the General Court confirmed that a viability-related sale of shares commitment did not infringe Article 345 TFEU on ownership neutrality: '[t]herefore, it must be held that Article 295 EC [meanwhile Article 345 TFEU] does not prevent the Commission from making the authorisation of State aid to an undertaking to be restructured subject to that undertaking's sale, where this is intended to ensure its long-term viability'.

⁽²¹⁾ As stated in commitment 19 of the 2013 Decision: Slovenia must propose to the European Commission for approval, no later than one month before the deadlines a list of one or more persons whom it proposes to appoint as Divestiture Trustee. The deadline to propose a Divestiture Trustee was thus November 30 2017.

⁽²²⁾ Commitment 3 (sale of participations), commitment 4 (divestment of non-core subsidiaries), commitment 5 (sale of joint venture participations), commitment 6 (sale of participations in banks).

2.4. The commitments in the 2017 Amendment Decision

- (26) On 13 April 2017, Slovenia formally notified a request to change some of the commitments underlying the 2013 Decision. In view of the deal size of the transaction and the short remaining time to sell 75 % - 1 share of the Bank, Slovenia notified a more gradual sale schedule: at least 50 % of the shares in NLB would be sold before the end of 2017 and the remainder (i.e. all shares but a blocking minority of 25 % + 1 share) by the end of 2018 ('the amended sale commitment'). The divestment commitment (in case Slovenia would fail to timely sell 50 % the Bank) continued to be a part of the commitments. The balance sheet commitment was clarified and Slovenia also notified additional commitments so as to preserve the balance of the 2013 Decision. Slovenia proposed for instance to extend NLB's acquisition ban until end 2019.
- (27) Concretely, Slovenia committed to the following:
- '(14) [reduction of State's shareholding and foreign banking subsidiaries] Slovenia will reduce its shareholding in NLB to 25 % plus one share ("Blocking Minority") as follows:
- (a) by at least 50 % by 31 December 2017. If Slovenia has not entered into (a) binding sale and purchase agreement(s) for the sale of its shareholding in NLB by at least 50 %, Slovenia and NLB shall grant to the Divestiture Trustee an exclusive mandate to sell NLB's participations in (its foreign Balkan ⁽²³⁾) banking subsidiaries for a minimum price not lower than [...].
 - (b) having sold at least 50 % of its shareholding in NLB in accordance with subparagraph (14 a), Slovenia will further reduce its shareholding to the Blocking Minority by 31 December 2018. If Slovenia has not entered into (a) binding sale and purchase agreement(s) for the sale of its shareholding in NLB exceeding the Blocking Minority by 31 December 2018, Slovenia shall grant to the Divestiture Trustee (appointed in accordance with paragraph 19) an exclusive mandate to reduce the Slovenia's shareholding in NLB to the Blocking Minority for the then prevailing market price...'
- (28) When assessing whether the proposed modifications to the restructuring plan called into question the conclusion reached in the 2013 Decision as to NLB's viability, the Commission noted in recital (33) of the 2017 Amendment Decision that Slovenia would remain committed to divest 50 % of NLB before end 2017 and the second tranche of 25 % - 1 share in 2018. The more gradual sale of shares was accompanied by additional commitments. The Commission concluded the proposed amendments to the commitments would not negatively affect the viability of the Bank. In its assessment, the Commission also relied to an important extent on the prolongation of the acquisition ban, which was discussed both under the burden sharing and distortion of competition compatibility sections. Based on those commitments, the Commission concluded that the compatibility of the State aid with the internal market could be confirmed.

2.5. The interrupted sale process ⁽²⁴⁾

- (29) On 13 July 2015, Slovenia's National Assembly endorsed a strategy to manage State investments, also with details on NLB's divestment process. This strategy provided for instance that the Slovenian authorities would keep a Blocking Minority in NLB and that none of the private investors of NLB would own a bigger share in the Bank than Slovenia.
- (30) In the beginning of 2016, the Slovenian Sovereign Holding ('SSH') who holds the State's financial participations, started the selection process of a financial advisor to sell the shares of NLB and signed on 1 April 2016 an engagement letter with Deutsche Bank. In the beginning of May 2016, Deutsche Bank advised in a feasibility study to sell the shares of NLB by means of an initial public offering ('IPO'). In later months, the SSH and its financial advisor proceeded with the selection of legal advisors, the due diligence of NLB and the drafting of the IPO prospectus and the presentations. In September 2016 however, the SSH decided to postpone the sales process until the first half of 2017. In the first half of 2017, the Commission approved a more gradual sale process and Slovenia and NLB organised road shows with institutional investors.
- (31) On 29 May 2017 the Slovenian authorities rejected a motion by the SSH to protect NLB from the negative impact of litigation in Croatia. The litigation relates to pending Croatian court cases ⁽²⁵⁾ related to foreign currency deposits [...] following the break-up of Yugoslavia.
- (32) On 8 June 2017, the Slovenian authorities decided to halt the sale process of NLB.

⁽²³⁾ The full list of subsidiaries is listed in recital (22).

⁽²⁴⁾ Based to a large extent on the Monitoring Trustee report dated 13 July 2017.

⁽²⁵⁾ A large number of court cases are still pending. On 23 November 2017, the court of second instance (County Court) in Zagreb adjudged one of Zagrebačka banka's lawsuits against Ljubljanska banka NLB to the detriment of Ljubljanska banka and NLB. See: http://www.mf.gov.si/en/media_room/news/3349/

- (33) As regards the general market climate and the IPO climate in 2017, the Eurostoxx Banks index rose by 15 % between 12 December 2016 and 12 December 2017 ⁽²⁶⁾. There were also a large number of privatisation transactions that were concluded successfully, including IPOs or secondary offerings ⁽²⁷⁾ of financial institutions.

2.6. The April 2016 monitoring trustee *ad hoc* report on corporate governance

- (34) In April 2016, the monitoring trustee prepared — at the request of the Commission — an *ad hoc* report on NLB's corporate governance commitments. This report followed a period of high turnover among the members of NLB's supervisory board.
- (35) The report explained that 'In January 2015, the Bank of Slovenia requested an additional assessment in terms of the collective suitability of the supervisory board. The assessment of the collective suitability showed that the supervisory board has inadequately expressed competences in the following areas: strategy and development, corporate banking, retail banking, risk management and human resources management. It also stated that the supervisory board lacks the variability in terms of gender, seniority, banking experience and experience from abroad, and that the number of members of the supervisory board in comparable companies is nine.'
- (36) In order to increase the number of members of the supervisory board and to fill also a number of vacancies, the SSH appointed on 9 February 2016 five new supervisory board members. The *ad hoc* report comments as follows on those five members:

'in fact [...] out of five new supervisory board members [...] considered as conditionally suitable by the external body of the SSH, but the Management Board of the SSH decided that the concerns are of minor importance, that the [...] extensive knowledge of banking law and could valuably contribute to the work of the supervisory board.'

'Some of the new members of the supervisory board have previous banking experience gained at NLB. In one case, the new member of the supervisory board was engaged as CEO in one of the subsidiaries of NLB until 31 December 2015'

'After the election at the general meeting of shareholders, the SSH sent the "fit and proper" test to the Bank of Slovenia. Following the request of the Bank of Slovenia in the letter dated 27 January 2016, NLB also prepared the "fit and proper tests" for four newly elected members of the supervisory board, i.e. Janko Gedrih, Anton Ribnikar, Anton Macuh and Primož Karpe. On 15 April 2016, three of the new members of the supervisory board, i.e. Janko Gedrih, Anton Ribnikar and Anton Macuh, gave irrevocable resignation with immediate effect. Primož Karpe [...].'

- (37) Table 2 summarises the changes in the supervisory board since 2015. Over that period, 10 members of the supervisory board have resigned or have been recalled and the average tenure of the current members of the supervisory board amounts to only 15 months.

Table 2

Members of NLB's supervisory board in 2015-2017

Members of supervisory board in 2015-2017	Appointment date	Resignation / recall date	Period in place	Current member?
Gorazd Podbevšek	11/06/2013	10/02/2016	2 years 8 months	No
Tit A. Erker	11/06/2013	03/08/2016	3 years 2 months	No
Uroš Ivanc	11/06/2013		3 years 10 months	No (4 year term expired)
Miha Košak	11/06/2013	10/02/2016	2 years 8 months	No
Sergeja Slapničar	11/06/2013	20/03/2017	9 months	No
Peter Groznik	04/11/2014	27/08/2015	9 months	Yes (resigned in 2015, but rejoined in September 2017)
Andreas Klinggen	07/04/2015		2 years 9 months	Yes
Janko Gedrih	10/02/2016	15/04/2016	2 months	No

⁽²⁶⁾ See: <https://www.stoxx.com/index-details?symbol= SX7E>

⁽²⁷⁾ Transactions in 2017 include, inter alia, the fully subscribed IPOs of Unicaja and Allied Irish Bank and secondary offerings of ABN Amro and a.s.r. in the Netherlands.

Members of supervisory board in 2015-2017	Appointment date	Resignation / recall date	Period in place	Current member?
Anton Ribinkar	10/02/2016	15/04/2016	2 months	No
Anton Macuh	10/02/2016	15/04/2016	2 months	No
Primož Karpe	15/04/2016		1 year 9 months	Yes
Dr Lazslo Urban	11/02/2016		1 year 11 months	Yes
David Kastelic	04/08/2016	08/09/2017	1 year 1 month	No
David E. Simon	04/08/2016		1 year 5 months	Yes
Alexander Bayr	04/08/2016		1 year 5 months	Yes
Matjaž Titan	04/08/2016	21/04/2017	9 months	No
Vida Šeme Hočevar	08/09/2017		4 months	Yes
Simona Kozjek	08/09/2017		4 months	Yes
Peter Groznik	08/09/2017		4 months	Yes

3. POSITION OF SLOVENIA

- (38) Slovenia recalls that the 2013 Decision provided that the sale commitment was meant to ‘significantly reduce the external influence in the Bank’s management and business activities’⁽²⁸⁾.
- (39) Slovenia highlights that — with the exception of the amended sale commitment — Slovenia and NLB have so far implemented all the other State aid commitments.
- (40) Slovenia also considers that NLB is now fully viable and it points in this regard to NLB’s RoE of 15.9 % and its core equity tier 1 ratio of 16.3 %⁽²⁹⁾. Slovenia considers that the corporate governance of NLB has been changed significantly and that now there is no State influence on the day-to-day business of NLB.
- (41) Slovenia explains that it wants to amend the sale commitment a second time in the following manner:
- Slovenia wants to launch the divestment of its shareholding in NLB to 25 % + 1 share in 2018 and to complete it in 2019.
 - in order to give the Commission comfort that the corporate governance of NLB will in the meantime remain with no State influence on the day-to-day business, the Slovenian authorities propose to nominate a ‘blind trustee’⁽³⁰⁾.
 - Slovenia also proposes that all commitments as defined in the 2013 Decision (as amended by the 2017 Amendment Decision) cease to apply from 31 December 2017, with the exception of the sale commitment as described in this recital.
- (42) Slovenia explains that it proposes a longer deadline for the sale commitment because it is also in the process of divesting 100 % of its shareholding in Abanka, the number three bank in the country [...].

⁽²⁸⁾ Recital (131) of the 2013 Decision

⁽²⁹⁾ Based on latest financial figures as available on: <https://www.nlb.si/nlb/nlb-portal/eng/investor-relations/financial-reports/prezentacija-nlb-3q2017.pdf>

⁽³⁰⁾ The ‘blind trustee’ refers to an independent trustee which would exercise, in the name of and on behalf of Slovenia as a shareholder of NLB, all usual regular competencies of a shareholder. The terms of the appointment of the trustee are outlined in recital (43)

- (43) As regards the blind trustee, Slovenia explains that it will be assigned to an independent expert on the following terms:
- a) The blind trustee would be nominated by Slovenia on the basis of a public international tender. The nomination procedure would be concluded no later than [March 1-June 30] 2018 [...], to be decided upon and be approved by the existing supervisory board. The mandate of the blind trustee would be regulated in a contract between Slovenia, the SSH and the blind trustee.
 - b) The concrete terms of engagement of such blind trustee need to be elaborated together with the Commission and the ECB to guarantee strongest safeguards against State's interference in the day-to-day operations of NLB.
 - c) Before the appointment of such blind trustee, Slovenia will obtain a formal approval or non-objection from the Commission as well as the ECB (as required by applicable respective competency regulations) as regards the following:
 - i. the content of the public international tender,
 - ii. the content of the contract to be concluded between Slovenia, the SSH and the blind trustee (the blind trustee's terms of engagement),
 - iii. the selected blind trustee.
 - d) The blind trustee would exercise, in the name of and on behalf of Slovenia as a shareholder of NLB, all usual regular competencies of a shareholder with the following exceptions (to be detailed in the blind trustee's terms of engagement):
 - while taking care that all legal, accounting and other regulatory requirements are complied with in full, the blind trustee shall orient itself by the existing NLB Group Strategy 2016-2020 and dividend payment included in it;
 - the blind trustee will not be competent to decide on the amendments to the statutes of NLB without prior approval from the SSH;
 - the blind trustee will not be competent to effect the disposal of any part of the State's shareholding in NLB;
 - the blind trustee should follow existing accounting policies as set in the existing NLB Group Strategy 2016-2020.
 - e) The blind trustee should exercise its rights independently but with due skill, care and diligence, in the best interest of Slovenia as a shareholder of NLB.
 - f) Slovenia will set business performance indicators to be achieved by the blind trustee in the contract between Slovenia, the SSH and the blind trustee. Slovenia can dismiss the blind trustee if the blind trustee does not exercise the rights in the best interest of Slovenia as a shareholder of NLB. In this case the nomination procedure of a new blind trustee should be performed.
- (44) Slovenia considers that the proposed amendments, and specifically the appointment of a blind trustee, provide the strongest possible assurances that the risk of the State's influence in the day-to-day business of NLB is neutralised and that business decisions will be taken solely by the management of the Bank.
- (45) Slovenia considers that the proposed package of commitments would not affect the assessment of burden-sharing as made in the 2013 Decision and the 2017 Amendment Decision and would equivalently limit the distortions of competition. Slovenia states that additional commitments imposed on NLB would not contribute to the aim of the initial commitment to implement a business-oriented corporate governance structure, but would rather impede the overall aim to restore NLB's viability in the long-term.

4. ASSESSMENT

4.1. Existence of aid

- (46) According to Article 107(1) TFEU, State aid is any aid granted by a Member State or through State resources in any form whatsoever which distorts, or threatens to distort, competition by favouring certain undertakings, in so far as it affects trade between Member States.
- (47) In the 2013 Decision, the Commission already concluded that the measures described in recital (16) represent State aid ⁽³¹⁾. That assessment remains unchanged.

⁽³¹⁾ See section 8.1 of the 2013 Decision.

4.2. Compatibility of the aid

- (48) In the 2013 Decision, the Commission concluded that the State aid measures in favour of NLB were compatible with the internal market since they were necessary to remedy a serious disturbance in the Slovenian economy in the meaning of Article 107(3)(b) TFEU. The Commission concluded that the restructuring plan and the associated restructuring commitments would allow NLB to return to long-term viability, while also sufficiently addressing burden sharing and competition issues. The Commission confirmed this compatibility analysis in the 2017 Amendment Decision on the basis of amended commitments.
- (49) The Commission observes that at least one important restructuring commitment has not been complied with. Indeed, the deadline to sell 50 % of NLB's shares by 31 December 2017 has elapsed [...]. Moreover, Slovenia has not proposed a divestiture trustee to sell NLB's foreign Balkan subsidiaries by 30 November 2017.
- (50) The Commission therefore concludes that Slovenia has implemented the aid measures described in recital (16) in an unlawful manner.
- (51) As regards compliance with other commitments of the 2013 Decision and the 2017 Amendment Decision ⁽³²⁾, the monitoring trustee will provide the Commission with a report — by 31 May 2018 at the latest — with information allowing the Commission to verify compliance with those commitments at the end of 2017.
- (52) As regards Slovenia's non-compliance with the amended sale commitment (or the divestment commitment), the Commission observes that Slovenia has not provided the Commission with a proper justification for the non-compliance. During the administrative procedure described in recitals (4) to (8) above, the Slovenian authorities repeatedly referred to ongoing litigation with Croatia.
- (53) The Commission also observes that for the entire year 2017, the IPO market and the market for corporate activity was open as is also illustrated by the information in recital (33). Therefore, the Commission concludes that there is no reason why the sale process could not have been implemented.
- (54) The Commission also notes that Slovenia notified on 21 December 2017 an amended commitment catalogue, which risks delaying the sale of the shares of NLB until 31 December 2019. Slovenia proposes to appoint a blind trustee for the period during which NLB's shares are not sold to compensate for this delay.
- (55) The Commission observes that a restructuring decision can be amended where the amendment does not entail any additional aid and the amendment is based on new commitments which can be considered equivalent to those originally provided. In that situation, the existing aid measures would remain compatible on the basis of Article 107(3)(b) TFEU if the overall balance of the original decision remains intact. In order to preserve the original balance, the altered commitments should not negatively affect the viability of the aid beneficiary, with the overall set of commitments remaining equivalent in terms of burden-sharing and compensatory measures taking into account the requirements of the Restructuring Communication ⁽³³⁾.
- (56) In the case at hand, however, the Commission has serious doubts that the amended commitments notified by Slovenia are equivalent to the commitments authorised in the 2013 Decision and the 2017 Amendment Decision.
- (57) Firstly, the Commission recalls that the viability section of the 2013 Decision was crucially based on a change in NLB's ownership structure. In 2013, the Slovenian authorities had indeed committed to eliminate the State's influence on NLB's day-to-day operations. However, in view of the amended commitments notified by Slovenia, the Commission has serious doubts whether, in the absence of such an ownership change, the long-term viability of NLB can be assured.
- (58) The Commission observes that also other elements point at viability problems in the long term ⁽³⁴⁾. NLB has for instance not yet restarted to issue new subordinated debt capital. NLB also still has a high level of non-performing loans. Finally, in spite of the prominent record of poor corporate governance in the past, the Commission observes that even in the restructuring period, the Slovenian authorities have not convincingly shown that such problems have been effectively addressed. The Commission refers in this regard to the high turnover in the Bank's supervisory board and to the issues surrounding the nomination of Mr. Janko Gedrih, Mr. Anton Ribnikar and Mr. Anton Macuh as referred to in recital (36) ⁽³⁵⁾.

⁽³²⁾ The Commission recalls that 2017 Amendment Decision already contained a number of commitments (inter alia, the acquisition ban) which were applicable beyond 2017.

⁽³³⁾ Commission Communication on the return to viability and the assessment of restructuring measures in the financial sector in the current crisis under the State aid rules, OJ C 195, 19.8.2009, p. 9.

⁽³⁴⁾ The Commission considers the bank's capital ratio and funding structure (as described in recitals (11) and (12)) are positive elements in the current financials, but do not address the long-term viability issues that the sale commitment would address.

⁽³⁵⁾ See section 2.6 of the present Decision.

- (59) Secondly, as regards Slovenia's proposal to appoint a blind trustee, the Commission has serious doubts as to whether the blind trustee could address NLB's viability problems to the same extent as a permanent ownership change. In this context, the Commission notes that an ownership change would steer the Bank — at all its levels — to value maximising behaviour and would not pursue other short-term or long-term political objectives. An ownership change (with respect to the owner of a bank at the time that it was in difficulty and received State aid for its restructuring, irrespective of whether that owner was the State or a private person) is also crucial in terms of viability because it is doubtful that such owner can credibly turn around the bank towards viability. Such ownership change is also important for reasons of moral hazard.
- (60) The Commission also recalls that corporate governance arrangements in the case of NLB [...] have proven rather ineffective. Recital (15) explains that KBC, when being a large shareholder of NLB, was represented at the Bank's management and supervisory board. This however was in itself not sufficient to prevent State interference. The Commission also observes even in the restructuring period structural corporate governance weaknesses ⁽³⁶⁾.
- (61) Finally, the Commission also points at a number of important practical problems related to the appointment of the blind trustee. Selecting and appointing such a trustee is a time consuming process. It is also questionable whether a blind trustee who can be dismissed by the Slovenian Authorities (see recital 43 (f)) if he does not exercise his duties in the best interest of Slovenia as a shareholder can indeed fully live up to the required independence. It also requires a number of regulatory approvals, which implies that Slovenia cannot ensure with full certainty that a blind trustee will eventually be appointed. The Commission also observes that Slovenia only wants to appoint such a blind trustee after the publication of the 2017 accounts, while there does not seem to be an objective rationale for waiting so long. A blind trustee would probably need some time to familiarise himself or herself with the Bank and its practices. Finally, the blind trustee will not be appointed on 1 January 2018 (i.e. immediately after the expiry of the deadline for the sale of shares on 31 December 2017), which inevitably implies that there will be a gap during which neither will the shares of the company have been sold nor will the company be controlled by a blind trustee.
- (62) Based on the above, the Commission has serious doubts that the blind trustee proposal is equivalent to the sale commitment. Given the importance of the sale commitment, it also seems very difficult to find a measure which is genuinely equivalent.
- (63) The Commission also has come to the preliminary conclusion that the delay of the sale of shares *de facto* prolongs the restructuring period. As a number of commitments were logically linked to the restructuring period (see recital (25)), the Commission at first sight believes that a prolongation of the deadline for the sale of shares should go hand in hand with a prolongation of other restructuring commitments. Indeed, NLB will be active in the market for a longer period without having fully ensured its long-term viability. This could be a source of distortions of competition, unduly harming non-aided competitors or aided competitors who diligently implement their restructuring plan and commitments. Therefore, in order to preserve the balance of the existing commitments, the Commission believes that the Slovenian authorities should present additional measures to compensate for the delayed restructuring process. At this stage, the Commission doubts that Slovenia has offered sufficient compensation for this general delay of the restructuring process. The Commission doubts whether Slovenia could not further improve NLB's viability by substantially reducing the last proposed divestment deadlines, by further changing the modalities of the sales process as described in recitals (29) and (30) and/or by converting the blind trustee in a fully empowered divestiture trustee. The Commission also doubts whether Slovenia should not consider further structural measures for NLB such as divestments of certain subsidiaries and/or behavioural measures. There are also doubts whether new initiatives such as the liquidation of the leasing company and subsequent establishment of a new leasing company ⁽³⁷⁾ infringe the spirit of the commitment to divest the Bank's non-core subsidiaries.
- (64) As regards the timeline of the sale of shares, the Commission recalls that point 15 of the Restructuring Communication explicitly provides that the restructuring period should be as short as possible. However, the Slovenian authorities did not provide in their notification any valid justification for the further delay of the sale of shares. As regards the argument that Slovenia cannot run the sale of shares of NLB in parallel with the privatisation of Abanka, the deadline for sale of which is mid-2019 and thus posterior to the deadline initially committed to by Slovenia ⁽³⁸⁾ for the sale of shares of NLB, the Commission observes that the two privatisations follow a different process (an IPO vs. a trade sale) and therefore also target different investors which are generally operating internationally. Moreover, the Commission also observes that other Member States also committed to large corporate restructurings simultaneously for a number of banks ⁽³⁹⁾.

⁽³⁶⁾ See recital (58).

⁽³⁷⁾ See recital (14).

⁽³⁸⁾ See commitment 38 of Commission Decision in Case SA.38522 (2014/N) — Restructuring aid for Banka Celje/Abanka, OJ C 393, 17.02.2015, p. 11.

⁽³⁹⁾ Referring to commitments (including significant divestments) by Spain for the restructuring plans of Spanish banks in 2012/2013 and by Greece for the restructuring plans of the four large Greek banks in 2014/2015.

- (65) The Commission observes that the current Slovenian proposal only contains a sale of shares commitment (with a longer deadline) and no longer contains the alternative divestment commitment. The Commission observes that this is different and significantly weaker from the existing commitment and did not find any justification for this difference.
- (66) Finally, the Commission also notes that a number of the commitments underlying the 2017 Amendment Decision are applicable beyond 2017. The Commission takes in particular note of the acquisition ban prolongation until 2019. The amended commitments (see recital (41)) suggest that the Slovenian authorities do not intend to live up to those commitments anymore. The Commission invites the Slovenian authorities to clarify this matter.
- (67) The Commission invites Slovenia and interested parties to comment on the preliminary findings of recitals 0 to (66).

5. CONCLUSION

- (68) The Commission concludes that, by breaching the commitments described in recital (49), Slovenia granted unlawful aid. Furthermore, in regard to the proposed amendments described in recitals (41) and (43), the Commission raises serious doubts as to the compatibility of the aid with the internal market based on the information available at this time.

6. DECISION

In the light of the foregoing considerations, the Commission, acting under the procedure laid down in Article 108(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, requests Slovenia to submit its comments and to provide all such information as may help to assess the compatibility of the measures, within one month of the date of receipt of this letter. It requests your authorities to forward a copy of this letter to the recipient of the aid immediately.

The Commission would draw your attention to Article 16 of 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 (OJ L 248, 24.9.2015, p. 9), which provides that where negative decisions are taken in cases of unlawful aid, this aid may be recovered from the recipient.

The Commission warns Slovenia that it will inform interested parties by publishing this letter and a meaningful summary of it in the Official Journal of the European Union. It will also inform interested parties in the EFTA countries which are signatories to the EEA Agreement, by publication of a notice in the EEA Supplement to the Official Journal of the European Union and will inform the EFTA Surveillance Authority by sending a copy of this letter. All such interested parties will be invited to submit their comments within one month of the date of such publication.

Slovenia exceptionally accepts that the present decision be adopted and notified in the English language, for reasons of urgency.
