

23/02/2009

The Duma Daily

Plugchieva to attend an international OLAF seminar

Deputy PM Meglena Plugchieva will attend the international OLAF seminar themed 'OLAF – keeper of EU financing'. The event starts Monday and will be held under the auspices of Plugchieva. OLAF Spokesman Alessandro Buttice will be among the lecturers at the forum.

Novinite.com - Sofia News Agency

OLAF Counts on Reliable Partners in Bulgaria

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) has had some reliable partners among the Bulgarian officials in the last 6-8 months. This was announced in Sofia Monday by the OLAF's spokesperson, Alessandro Buttice, the OLAF Chair's Anticorruption advisor, Wolfgang Hetzer, and the head of OLAF's "Agriculture" Department, Elizabeth Sperber, at a seminar organized by "Journalists against Corruption" Club and the Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office. "There is no cooperation between the different Bulgarian authorities, and it is like there is a network of people, which interferes with the good collaborative achievements", the OLAF officials commented. "Bulgaria is going through a difficult period, because it has to convince the international community of its anti-corruption fight, and of its support of European Union's financial policy", Alessandro Buttice said. Wolfgang Hetzer stressed the importance of Bulgaria's hard work until the next OLAF's report. Elizabeth Sperber described the last few months as a period of standstill because of the numerous changes in Bulgaria's State Agriculture Fund.

Bulgarian News Agency (BTA)

OLAF Spokesman: Fighting Corruption and Fraud is a Moral Obligation for Each Bulgarian

The spokesman of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), Alessandro Buttice, said here Monday that Bulgarians should understand that the fight against corruption and fraud is a moral obligation for everyone. Buttice was among the participants in a workshop on the role of OLAF in protecting the EU funds against fraud, which was organized by the Journalists against Corruption club in partnership with the prosecuting office, OLAF, the European Social Fund and the Operational Programme "Administrative Capacity". In Buttice's words, OLAF believes that the fight against corruption and fraud is a matter of prevention. He also said that the international community needs to be convinced that the ongoing investigations protect the interests of European taxpayers. A film has been made to show how OLAF works, said Reneta Nikolova of Journalists against Corruption. It will be shown on the Bulgarian National Television and in several local offices of the her club. It is expected to reach an audience of 2 million. PK/

Advisory to BTA's External Service Subscribers

Following are some of the main stories to be moved by BTA's External Service in the next few hours: Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev launches a project of Plovdiv Airport modernization. Transport Minister Peter Moutafchiev and Plovdiv Regional Governor Todor Petkov among others attend the ceremony. Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European funds management Meglena Plougchieva opens an international seminar entitled "OLAF - the European Funds

Guardian" organized by the Journalists against Corruption club. Alessandro Buttice, Spokesman of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), is among the lecturers. Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European funds management Meglena Ploumchieva and Agriculture and Food Minister Valeri Tsvetanov launch a national programme for support of the vine and wine sector in 2009 - 2014 period. The first of seven topical debates between representatives of business and political forces in the context of the forthcoming parliamentary and MEP elections starts at the National Palace of Culture. It is entitled "The Bulgarian Project - Economic Priorities under Terms of Crisis: Export Policy; Foreign Investments; Credit Policy; Capital Market; Eurozone; Tax and Budget Policies." RI/RI

OLAF Officials Optimistic about Bulgaria, Say Fighting Corruption and Fraud Is a Moral Obligation for Each Bulgarian

The spokesman of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), Alessandro Buttice, said here Monday that Bulgarians should understand that the fight against corruption and fraud is a moral obligation for everyone. Buttice was among the participants in a workshop on the role of OLAF in protecting the EU funds against fraud, which was organized by the Journalists against Corruption club in partnership with the prosecuting office, OLAF, the European Social Fund and the Operational Programme "Administrative Capacity". In Buttice's words, OLAF believes that the fight against corruption and fraud is a matter of prevention. He also said that the international community needs to be convinced that the ongoing investigations protect the interests of European taxpayers. OLAF's Anticorruption Advisor Wolfgang Hetzer said he is positive that change will happen even though there are sure to be disappointments along the way. He also said that a lot of work remains to be done by legislators and the administration. Elizabeth Sperber in charge of agriculture at OLAF said that they have established very close contacts with their Bulgarian partners in the past eight months. Some of the problems have already been resolved. She, too, is optimistic that the situation in Bulgaria is going to change. In her remarks at the forum, Deputy Prime Minister Meglena Ploumchieva, who is in charge of the management of EU funding, said that in the recent months Bulgaria has been "black-labeled for its problems with corruption". She believes that the situation gets even more complex with elections coming up for national Parliament and for European Parliament. She urged for drawing a line between the problems and the accomplishments: "The problems should be identified and admitted but where progress is made and results are achieved, those should be acknowledged". Ploumchieva said that a criminal police expert of the German Federal Ministry of the Interior is expected in Bulgaria as an adviser on the request of Interior Minister Mihail Mikov. He will assist in the counter-corruption efforts. Several foreign experts are already in Bulgaria to aid its efforts towards greater transparency and better information exchange. Ploumchieva went on to catalogue changes that have been approved in effective laws in a bid to improve transparency and fight corruption, and a package of changes that are still in the pipeline, aimed to streamline the procedures and tighten the requirements for all institutions and citizens. By way of example, she said that under one proposed amendment (to the Obligations and Contracts Act) all payments of more than 5,000 leva (2,500 euro) will be made by bank; under another persons connected with debtors to the public purse will be barred from public procurement contracts. Also, amendments to a government ordinance will cut to six from 11 months the period from the application for EU funding to the contracting of payment; the number of required documents will be reduced and the assessment committees will include external evaluators and experts to ensure objectivity and preclude discrimination against participants. Ploumchieva also said that a team under her is reviewing the rights for funding under the Rural Development Programme. This sector

commands a huge financial resource (3.2 billion euro) which will benefit 80 per cent of the national territory and 44 per cent of the population. "This is why it is important that we have a simple and transparent process of management and utilization of the funding under this programme, and that the control mechanisms are ensured - considering our bitter experience with SAPARD," said the Deputy Prime Minister. Since last September when a special unit of prosecutors and investigators was set up under prosecutor Margarita Popova, to investigate fraud unvolving EU funding, 102 pre-trial proceedings have been opened, 27 indictments have been served, six sentences have been enforced and damage for a total of 45 million leva have been prevented. According to MP Boiko Velikov, who chairs the parliamentary anti-corruption committee, Bulgaria has a problem with confidence in the state institutions. He said that an upcoming meeting of his committee will look into the performance of the customs administration. Stoiko Steov MP of the anti-corruption committee said that a magistrates' code of ethics is in the pipeline and will hopefully do away with any corruption practices in the judiciary. He does not think that corruption in Bulgaria is of a magnitude that threatens the foundations of the state. He expects a positive European Commission report this summer on Bulgaria's performance in the areas of justice and home affairs. PK/LN/

24/02/2009

Bulgarian News Agency (BTA)

"24 Chassa" reports that the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) praised Bulgaria at a seminar on Monday that businesses do not offer bribes to have projects approved for SAPARD financing. Elizabeth Sperber, who is in charge of agriculture at OLAF, said that it was known from reliable sources that one had to pay a bribe to get a subsidy in the past. The daily recalls that OLAF is investigating 25 cases of fraud involving SAPARD money in Bulgaria. "Dnevnik" quotes Sperber as saying that an old boys' network is hampering real reforms. She argued at Monday's seminar that this network wants to keep things the way they were done for years. In contrast, "Sega" reports on its front page that "OLAF has implicated the Agriculture Fund in negligence about fraud involving EU funding". The Fund allegedly ignored OLAF reports about SAPARD fraud for six months and did not pressure the rogue companies to pay back the subsidies. "Sega" holds an OLAF letter of February 9 to Deputy Prime Minister Meglena Plugchieva, Agriculture Minister Valeri Tsvetanov and Agriculture Fund Director Alizan Yahova.

The Klasa Daily

OLAF: Pre-trial reforms needed

A pre-trial reform is needed in Bulgaria, told OLAF Chair's Anticorruption advisor, Wolfgang Hetzer yesterday at the seminar 'OLAF- the protector of EU funds'. Hetzer emphasized that some pre-trial proceedings require harder work. Head of OLAF's "Agriculture" Department, Elizabeth Sperber told that over the past eight months the EU service is working in tight relations together with the Agriculture Fund under the execution of SAPARD program.

The Dnevnik Daily

OLAF Chair's Anti-corruption Adviser, Wolfgang Hetzer: We cannot replace Bulgarian authorities

I see no arguments that towards Bulgaria are exercised double standards from Brussel's side. We don't claim that corruption exists only in Bulgaria, on the contrary, it is spread in the entire EU, probably in the entire world, but this cannot be an excuse for a criminal behaviour. I would like to emphasize that OLAF is not a Messiah. We have limited powers and cannot replace the Bulgarian authorities. OLAF can only collaborate says OLAF Chair's Anti-Corruption Adviser Wolfgang Hetzer.

BNR, BNT, Darik Radio, FOCUS National Radio Network, FOCUS News Agency, bTV

OLAF: Net of 'old boys' is an obstacle for real reforms

Paying a bribe only for receiving the right to apply for EU financing, suspected in draining of EU resources sponsor the parties, there are connections between the administration and people that receive subsidies by fraud. This is only a small part of the full picture of criminal practices from the SAPARD program in Bulgaria, which were listed by the head of OLAF's "Agriculture" Department, Elizabeth Sperber. The state services have covered projects full of irregularities, there was a lack of collaboration with European institutions and the investigations for embezzlements in SAPARD were missing, said Sperber. According to her it is significant that nobody from the State Agriculture Fund paid attention that only for a single day have been applied 5 projects for the same sum. Another doubtful case according to OLAF is that SAPARD agency has approved 141 projects for only a week before the end of the program on December 31st 2006, having in mind that it gave a green light to 706 suggestions during the entire three years.

25/02/2009

Bnn, Bulgarian news network

OLAF Spokesperson Meets Bulgarian Officials

Alessandro Butiche, spokesperson to OLAF, the EU's anti-fraud office, spent an hour and a half at a meeting in the office of Bulgaria's chief Prosecutor, Tuesday. Besides chief prosecutor Boris Velchev, the meeting was also attended by the ministers of justice, Miglena Tacheva, and interior affairs, Mihail Mikov, as well as the head of the State Agency for National Security (DANS), Petko Sertov. Our co-operation is very good, Butiche said after the meeting. According to him the discussion revolved mainly around how to continue that. Mr Butiche said that everyone in Bulgaria ought to help in the fight against fraud and corruption. "Prosecutors must prosecute, judges must judge and citizens should alarm about cases of fraud that they know of", said the OLAF spokesperson. No concrete measures or particular cases were discussed at the meeting.
/bnn/

Bulgarian News Agency (BTA)

"Douma" has a story on the efforts against fraud and corruption quoting OLAF spokesman Alessandro Buttice as saying that fighting corruption is not only for the judiciary to do: it is a problem for the whole society ("Corruption Is a Problem of Society"). Buttice was among the participants in a meeting with Prosecutor General Boris Velchev, together with Deputy Prime Minister Meglena Plogchieva, Interior Minister Mihail Mikov and Justice Minister Miglena Tacheva.

"*Troud*" carries an interview with Alessandro Buttice. "The fight against fraud and corruption will not be over in days. It will take more time to see whether what the Bulgarian government has promised is being put in practice. What we see now is the big commitment it has made. You should know that the international community needs to be convinced that that the interests of European taxpayers are being protected by real investigations which produce results," Buttice said. [The quote is a translation from the interview in the Bulgarian language.]

"*24 Chassa*" says that OLAF has completed 4 investigations for frauds involving EU funding ("OLAF Sends Us The Bill for Four Investigations"). The final reports on these have been sent along with a request for paying back to the EU purse the money which has been fraudulently used. A part of the money is wrongfully charged duties which now have to be returned to Brussels.

The Trud Daily, The Gradski Vestnik Daily, The Duma Daily, The Monitor Daily, The Express Daily, The Dnevnik Daily, The Klasa Daily, The Sega Daily, The Standart Daily, The 24 Chasa Daily, The Ataka Daily, The Telegraph Daily,

Alessandro Buttice, OLAF spokesperson: Europe wants you to protect its interests

Interview with Mr Buttice, who took part in the international seminar in Bulgaria on the subject "OLAF – the guardian of EU funds". Mr Buttice took part in the international seminar in Bulgaria on the subject "OLAF – the guardian of the EU funds". Reporter: Is the European institutions' lack of trust in Bulgaria the biggest problem for our country, Mr Buttice? Alessandro Buttice: Trust is a very important thing. At the moment there is trust in our contacts with your country, but it must be improved in our everyday work. Reporter: The European Commission was very critical towards Bulgaria. Has OLAF registered any progress in our country's fight against corruption over the last few months? Alessandro Buttice: The fight against fraud and corruption cannot end in just a few days. We need more time to see whether what the Bulgarian government has promised to us will be put into practice. At the moment we see only the big commitment that your government has made. During the seminar regarding OLAF, organised by the Bulgarian club "Journalist Against Corruption", Ms Meglena Plugchieva took part, which is a sign for the commitment of the government. Reporter: What are your expectations after the involvement of the Bulgarian authorities in the fight against corruption? Alessandro Buttice: We are waiting to see concrete results from the investigations. Of course, when we talk about financial investigations, more time is needed, and we cannot expect them to end quickly. The court, prosecution, and investigators must work together in order to reach these concrete results. And we are in desperate need of these results. Reporter: Ms Elizabeth Sperber, Head of the Agriculture Unit with OLAF, said during the seminar that there was a network of people, who are trying to diminish the success of OLAF in Bulgaria. Which is this network? Alessandro Buttice: The cooperation between the different authorities in your country, between the different sectors in your administration is not very good. This is an issue in other EU member states as well. We, in OLAF, are trying to help improve this communication. There are a lot of people in Bulgaria, especially younger ones, who want your country to change for the better. We see some politicians, who are trying to make this change, and this is a very positive signal for us. You government is showing political will, but we expect to feel the will of the people as well, because it is very important. Reporter: According to you, was the establishment of SANS (State Agency for National Security) a positive step in our country's attempt to meet the expectations, which Brussels has from the Bulgarian institutions? Alessandro Buttice: It is still too early to see any results. We have managed to establish a very good cooperation with this agency (SANS). The combination of its functions as a law protecting and an intelligence body gives us hope that with

the necessary will and determination, these results could be reached. Reporter: Two elections will take place in Bulgaria soon – for European Parliament and for National Assembly. Do you think that before the elections the authorities are doing too much work and that the current events in Bulgaria are just for show? Alessandro Butticié: The elections must be left aside. We want all the investigations to be taken out of the political picture. These two things should not be mixed. Reporter: Does the interim report of the European Commission from February 16 give any hope that Bulgaria is starting to come out of the corruption swamp, as the MEP Geoffrey Van Orden said? Alessandro Butticié: This is a report of the European Commission for the progress made by your country and I have no right to make a comment on its conclusions, because they are only political. OLAF is an investigating body, not a political one. Reporter: OLAF is focusing its attention on the prevention. Alessandro Butticié: That's right. We are convinced that the fight against fraud and corruption is a moral obligation to everyone, and that is how you must feel in Bulgaria as well. This is also a question of prevention. In this direction the activity, which OLAF has with its communicational system in Bulgaria is vital. The club "Journalist Against Corruption" is a good example. I praise highly its positive part and the enthusiasm of its members on the issues of anti-corruption. Reporter: Not everyone in Bulgaria understands what exactly does OLAF do. Alessandro Butticié: You are going through a very sensitive period at the moment. It must be very clear that these issues are really important. The movie about OLAF, made by Reneta Nikolova, Chairperson of the Managing Committee of "Journalist Against Corruption", was presented at the seminar. You must know that the international community must be convinced that the interests of the European taxpayers are being protected through actual investigations, which give concrete results. Reporter: A few days ago an article of The Sunday Times explained in details a scheme for misappropriation of millions from EU's Parliament funds by MEPs. This shows that Bulgaria is not the only place where there is corruption. What is your comment? Alessandro Butticié: Of course, it is clear, and this is no news, that there is corruption in other countries as well. Reporter: Do you know that we Bulgarians are very suspicious, and there are a lot of people who think that Brussels is only looking in Bulgaria's yard, and does not see what is happening in its own? Alessandro Butticié: It is easy to admit that there is corruption in other countries. But compared to them, Bulgaria is a specific problem. Corruption could exist everywhere, but it must not be mistaken for other types of fraud and misappropriations. Because the case you mentioned with the MEPs is not corruption, it is a misappropriation, an irregularity. Reporter: Are you saying that Brussels has a special attitude towards Bulgaria? Alessandro Butticié: The fact that EU funds were stopped for Bulgaria means that there is a specific situation in Bulgaria. I will say it again, the corruption is not only in Bulgaria. There is corruption everywhere and it is not found only where it has not been checked. If you look for it, you will see that it is everywhere. Reporter: Is it appropriate for journalists to receive gifts? Recently, the investigated for EU misappropriation, Mario Nikolov, said that he would establish an award for the most objective journalist, and gave all reporters cans with goose liver. Is there a similar practice in Europe? Alessandro Butticié: Everyone has the right to do what they want with their money. It is not important what they do and what they give, but whether the journalists would agree to accept such presents. Yes, in some EU member states journalists receive presents occasionally. Reporter: The Bulgarian journalists considered this as an insult to their work! Alessandro Butticié: I can understand how they must have felt after such a "gift". But I want to tell you that when the journalists receive gifts and should they accept them or not – this is exactly the issue with which the club of journalists deals with. It is the body in Bulgaria, which inspects whether reporters should accept such gifts or not.