

OLAF: Bulgaria should prove EU financial interests are protected

The prime organization for the fight against fraud and corruption are the Bulgarian authorities, not OLAF, said Alessandro Buttice, Spokesman of OLAF, the European Anti-Fraud Office. He attended a seminar in Sofia organized by Journalists Against Corruption Club.

Alessandro Buttice attended a seminar in Sofia organized by Journalists Against Corruption Club. He also told the audience that keeping the public informed about such crimes had been the mission of OLAF since its very start. In his view the media and especially investigative journalism have a key role to play in the process apart from the investigation and the pre-court procedure.

“These are very sensitive times for Bulgaria. It must explain to the international public opinion that the fight against corruption is being taken seriously. This means that the international public opinion needs to be reassured by judicial decisions and investigative activities that the financial interests of the European Union are consistently protected.”

According to Wolfgang Hetzer, Advisor of the OLAF Director General, success requires national will, good administrative capacity and transparency of the actions of the authorities. We want to help the Bulgarian authorities in the solution of very complicated problems concerning corruption, he said. He believes that Bulgaria needs reform of the pre-court procedure, as well as further efforts in a few key trials.

Elizabeth Sperper, Head of Agriculture Department at OLAF, said that despite close cooperation under SAPARD, there had been serious problems at the Agriculture State Fund over the last 8 months, as well as problems with EU funds absorption under that programme. She added that there was a corruption network in the country that thwarted good results, and despite end-2008 changes the Agriculture State Fund was still deadlocked.

Deputy PM in charge of EU funds management Meglena Plugchieva said that the special unit combating fraud with EU money had prevented embezzlement of more than EUR 22 million, and that 6 verdicts had been enforced. She added that Bulgaria was still black labeled as a country with corruption problems, but it would be fair to separate problems from achievements, and spell out achievements clearly. “This country is in a very difficult situation being under scrutiny, but we do have too, the critical solidarity of the European Commission,” she pointed out.

In an interview for Radio Bulgaria the Chairman of the Anti-Corruption Committee at the Bulgarian National Assembly Boyko Velikov said the following:

Combating corruption is not a matter of a single campaign or of a single report. It requires consistent efforts for carrying out changes to the legislation and in the administration. The work of specialized bodies is also vital. We have to commend here the State National Security Agency. It was set up a year ago, but already has significant achievements in combating corruption. I think that we are on the right track. What we need is smooth coordination between the special bodies on the one hand, that have all the resources for combating fraud, and state institutions, on the other, that can provide the legislation basis and the administrative measures. We already work based on EU rules. We work hard to implement these rules at all levels. This is the best way to limit the scope of corruption in Bulgaria.”

Written by Tatiana Obretenova