

OLAF unravels fraud among partners in Rule of Law project in Syria

The European Union budget finances a wide range of programmes and projects which improve the lives of citizens across the EU and beyond, but fraudsters sometimes also targets these funds. The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) is mandated to detect, investigate and stop fraud with EU funds, ensuring that EU money are used as intended and do not end up in the pockets of fraudsters. This January 2020, OLAF closed an investigation into fraud against the EU budget relating to a “Rule of Law” project in Syria, recommending that the national authorities in the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium consider prosecuting the involved project partners for possible offences of fraud and forgery.

OLAF received information suggesting that a company based in the UK, and its partners in the Netherlands and the United Arab Emirates, might have been engaging in fraud against the EU budget, in relation to a “Rule of Law” project in Syria. OLAF established that the UK company, together with its partners, had entered into a contract with the EU to support possible prosecutions for violations of International Criminal and Humanitarian Law in Syria. The total value of this contract was EUR 1 999 830.

OLAF’s investigation revealed that while the partnership claimed to be supporting the rule of law, the partners were actually committing widespread violations themselves, including submission of false documents, irregular invoicing, and profiteering.

In January 2020, the Director-General of OLAF closed the case, making judicial recommendations to the relevant national authorities in the countries where the partner’s offices were located, the UK, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Further recommendations were issued to the European Commission to recover EUR 1 896 734 and to consider flagging the partners in the Commission’s Early Detection and Exclusion System database. This concluded a long and complicated investigation.

OLAF mission, mandate and competences:

OLAF’s mission is to detect, investigate and stop fraud with EU funds.

OLAF fulfils its mission by:

- carrying out independent investigations into fraud and corruption involving EU funds, so as to ensure that all EU taxpayers’ money reaches projects that can create jobs and growth in Europe;
- contributing to strengthening citizens’ trust in the EU Institutions by investigating serious misconduct by EU staff and members of the EU Institutions;
- developing a sound EU anti-fraud policy.

In its independent investigative function, OLAF can investigate matters relating to fraud, corruption and other offences affecting the EU financial interests concerning:

- all EU expenditure: the main spending categories are Structural Funds, agricultural policy and rural development funds, direct expenditure and external aid;
- some areas of EU revenue, mainly customs duties;
- suspicions of serious misconduct by EU staff and members of the EU institutions.

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