

Joining forces to fight fraud

Meeting of the National Anti-Fraud Coordination Services (AFCOS)

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) organised the 10th meeting of the national Anti-Fraud Coordination Services (AFCOS) from all EU Member States on 18-19 October 2023 in Vilnius, Lithuania. The annual conference was organised with the cooperation of the AFCOS Lithuania – the Financial Crime Investigation Service within the Ministry of Interior.

In his welcoming speech, OLAF Director-General Ville Itälä laid emphasis on the importance of the AFCOS network in the protection of the EU financial interest and the fight against fraud and corruption. He also underlined the need for stronger cooperation emphasising that *“it is important that we work together like never before to protect the EU’s financial interest. The economic and energy crises that followed the pandemic have created a perfect storm for fraudsters, it is imperative that OLAF and Member States governments and authorities work quickly and closely together to protect the unprecedented amounts of money which the Commission dedicated to the economic recovery. AFCOS and national authorities are on the frontline of the fight against fraud and OLAF is there with them”*.

The conference brought together over 70 representatives from across the EU Member States allowing to take stock of changes and new developments in structure, competences and activities of AFCOS offices following the changes made to the OLAF regulation in 2021. These gave more responsibility to AFCOS and placed greater emphasis on cooperation and information exchanges between OLAF and AFCOS.

European funds belong to Europeans, and not to fraudsters, as said by Director of the Lithuanian Financial Crime Investigation Service Rolandas Kiškis. OLAF and the AFCOS are working towards the same objective and share the same interests: to protect the financial interests of the EU and the interests of citizens to ensure that they can fully benefit from the opportunities provided by EU funds, in the EU and beyond. The numerous examples exchanged during the conference clearly showed the need of the whole anti-fraud community to act together, both at EU and national level.

Participants of the meeting discussed in depth multiple forms of investigative cooperation focusing in particular on shared management cases, including detection, reporting, access to bank account information and data bases. Effective and timely cooperation between OLAF and the Member States Authority, especially when it comes to sharing data, is crucial to the success of any investigation.

The AFCOS representatives also had the opportunity to exchange several best practices, including the work on RRF control systems to prevent, detect and correct fraud in Members States. The Opportunities offered by the Union Anti-Fraud Programme, managed by OLAF, were also discussed. The funds of this programme can be used for the

purchase of technical and operational investigative equipment, such as scanners and drones, as well as to put on specialised training and research activities linked to the protection of EU financial interests.

In the margins of the AFCOS meeting, OLAF Director-General Ville Itälä met representatives of all Lithuanian anti-fraud authorities, including the Minister of the Interior Ms Agnė Bilotaitė, to discuss the importance of OLAF's cooperation with national authorities in strengthening fraud prevention to protect the EU budget.

Background

EU Member States are required to designate an anti-fraud coordination service (AFCOS) in accordance with Article 12a of Regulation 883/2013 to facilitate effective cooperation and exchange of information, including information of an operational nature, with OLAF.

Member States are autonomous in deciding where to best place the AFCOS within their national administrative structure. The placement of AFCOS should provide for its visibility and importance in relation to other relevant authorities in the field of protection of the EU's financial interests. Some Member States placed their AFCOS either within the Ministry of Finance or the Ministry of Interior; others established it as an independent Government's service.

More information is available on [OLAF's website](#).

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.

Once OLAF has completed its investigation, it is for the competent EU and national authorities to examine and decide on the follow-up of OLAF's recommendations. All persons concerned are presumed to be innocent until proven guilty in a competent national or EU court of law.

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