

## **How information and communication can be a means of EU fraud prevention and a true service to the citizens in the respect of their rights?**

It is of paramount importance to all of us that the taxpayers money, originating from the EU budget funds, is being used only for the intended purposes and that nobody could misuse the resources of the common purse.

Communication is an essential tool in the fight against fraud. The building blocks of successful communication are reliable partners. Our partners are the Anti-Fraud Co-ordinating Service (AFCOS) together with its partners, OLAF Anti-Fraud Communicators Network (OAFCN), as well as media.

Two years ago the Ministry of Finance started acting as AFCOS and a year ago Estonia signed an agreement of mutual co-operation with the European Anti-Fraud Office. By this agreement the FCD became the body for ensuring the coordination of all legislative, administrative, and operational activities related to the protection of the national and the Communities' financial interests.

The objectives of AFCOS are very similar to those of OLAF – to protect the National and the Communities' financial interests. Misuse of the EU and National budgets can affect the successful implementation of the National Development Plan.

The creation of AFCOS has been one of the most important steps to ensure that the new member states would have proper and effective anti-fraud systems. Prevention is always better than treatment, and in this case also a lot cheaper. There are several areas where AFCOS and the national partners are going to focus on particular questions in order to further reinforce the national system. Areas with a higher risk are for example eligibility rules, effective recovery, control of payment requests, procurement procedures, on-the-spot controls, etc. AFCOS Estonia is working on these issues to further raise the professional level of relevant officials.

The first and most important task is to have all relevant parties work in the same direction. This can be achieved by setting common goals in an overall strategy. In co-operation with the national partners, AFCOS is currently developing a strategy for the reinforcement of the protection of the Communities' financial interest. The aim is to improve national systems in a profound way by analyzing the weaknesses and implementing an action plan for bracing those areas with higher risk.

In co-operation with OLAF an extensive training programs as well as seminars on irregularities, risk assessment, judicial co-operation, and various other topics have been organised to a large number of police and customs investigators from October 2003.

Strong emphasis has been put on awareness of the concept of irregularity and reporting obligations. AFCOS has issued a guideline for reporting irregularities explaining the EU requirements and national arrangements.

In order to ensure an effective co-operation between AFCOS and law-enforcement agencies, the AFCOS Steering Committee was established including representatives

from the Prosecutor's Office, Tax and Customs Board, Security Police Board, Central Criminal Police Department, and State Audit Office.

The responsibilities of the committee are to:

- Ensure the information exchange and co-operation on the national level and with OLAF regarding the protection of the Communities' financial interests.
- Analyse cases where EU financial interests are affected and decide on investigative measures.
- Make specific proposals to the Ministry of Finance to strengthen the protection of the Communities' financial interests.

AFCOS keeps investigative authorities informed on the latest developments originating from OLAF.

The committee has analysed several cases of suspected irregularities and the bodies represented in the committee have started investigations into these cases. The activities of AFCOS and its partners have played a significant role in timely reactions to cases of attempted irregularities and fraud, thus preventing financial damage.

In 2003 the government approved an anti-corruption strategy named "Honest State." The strategy sets an action plan for the fight against corruption from 2004 to 2007. The two primary branches of the plan are prevention and a more effective detection of crimes that have already been committed. In addition to the activities targeted at the officials, one needs to assimilate the comprehension of the essence of corruption within the society, i.e., explanation of the kind of behavior that is allowed or not allowed, and organisation of campaigns to increase awareness of the matter. A special hot line has been established in order to gain information for the detection of corruption cases.

The corruption tip phone that is in operation since May 2004 helps with the co-operation with the population, giving the people a possibility to report on different corruption cases or their suspicions of a possible corruption case. The security police analyses every tip thoroughly and according to its competence tries a case by itself or forwards it to the police, where each case is further analysed and tried.

The Security Police as well as the National Police Board have actively notified the public of the existence of the tip phone and raised the topic in local media to induce people to report about all cases of alleged corruption.

The co-operation between Estonian customs officials and OLAF began at the time when Estonia regained independence and the customs reorganised its operations. Mutual co-operation has been especially effective during the investigation of export fraud, specifically the export of butter and milk powder to EU member states. Good results have also been achieved in the prevention of cigarette smuggling. For instance in the beginning of May 2003, with the help of OLAF communication network, we managed to draw public attention to the importance of mutual co-operation between states in the detection of cigarette smuggling.

Media is our good partner in the shaping of public opinion. Electronic and print press gives us the chance to inform our target groups of depreciative actions, prevent violations of law, ect. In the long perspective we should gain public disapprobation of

the misuse of our, the taxpayers, money. The reflection of the topic of violations is a challenge for communication specialists; one must find a balance between the journalists' interest for details and the protection of the investigation process. If too much information is published too early on in the process, it may damage the investigators' work. However, if there is too little information, the story does not reach the news threshold and relevant information does not get reflected in the media.

It is obvious that co-operation can be productive only when information exchange between partners works effectively and without a glitch. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of OLAF Anti-Fraud Communicators Network, OAFCN. Through the network communication specialists from different countries are able to meet to discuss various complicated topics in our common fight against fraud. By taking part of OAFCN work since 2003, initially as a EU candidate member state, we have experienced an impressive synergy and seen the best practices, which co-operation between specialists of different countries can offer.

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