

Юридические науки

UDC 342.1

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INCREASING THE RISK OF CORRUPTION ACTIVITIES DURING A COVID-19 PANDEMIC

***Summary.** The actions of the Prosecutor`s Office of the Republic of Bulgaria are positively recognized not only by the Bulgarian society, but also by the previous European Commission in relation to the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism in the field of justice and home affairs. Thus, the last Monitoring Report on the progress of Bulgaria acknowledged the fulfillment of all criteria and the Commission expressed the opinion that the progress made by the Republic of Bulgaria on the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism is sufficient to meet the country`s commitments made at the moment of EU accession. This opinion does not*

minimize the expectations for outcomes in the fight against corruption and organized crime in the country. Therefore the efforts of the law enforcement authorities in recent years will not remain on an occasional basis, but will impose a lasting trend to strengthen the rule of law in the Republic of Bulgaria.

Key words: *Bulgarian Prosecutor's office, progress, positive results, pandemic, COVID-19.*

By a decision of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria of 13 March 2020, a state of emergency was imposed on the territory of the whole country due to the danger of the spread of Covid-19. The Prosecution, represented by the leadership, was one of the first advocates of the thesis of prevention and emergency action. In order to prevent the spread, anti-epidemic measures were introduced in respect to the population.

As a result, Bulgaria registers one of the lowest morbidity and mortality rates in Europe. The Prosecutor General set up an organization for counteracting the crimes in the state of emergency declared in the country, by forming National Headquarters in the Prosecutor's Office to interact with the National Operational Headquarters for combating coronavirus in the Republic of Bulgaria. The Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria (PORB) has taken a number of measures to protect the public interest and health, related to the prosecution of violators of anti-epidemic measures, compliance with quarantine conditions and stopping the spread of false news.

It was taken into account the fact that COVID-19 pandemic increases corruption risks in the healthcare sector. In a state of emergency and concentration of power, injection of a large amount of money into the economy to alleviate the crisis, corruption risks should not be underestimated. Transparency in the public

sector is one of the most important means of preventing corruption. The need for regular and reliable information from public institutions is crucial in emergencies.

The Healthcare Sector is particularly vulnerable due to the immediate need for medical supplies and protective equipment, which leads to simplification of the rules for public procurement. In this regard, the established National Headquarters in the PORB undertook a number of inspections on signals from citizens, media and non-governmental organizations for possible illegal spending of public resources to combat COVID-19 pandemic [1-3].

Numerous investigations have been launched to curb speculation on food prices, medical supplies, safeguards, and fuel prices. A well-known Bulgarian politician was accused of inciting the public to violation of anti-epidemic measures established in the country in the conditions of a state of emergency.

The Supreme Administrative Prosecutor's Office requested information from the Council of Ministers on the actions taken by the competent executive bodies related to the transformation of funds from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and their transfer to other operational programs with the purpose to support the fight against COVID-19.

The investigation was initiated after the Deputy Prosecutor General at the Supreme Administrative Prosecutor's Office referred the matter on its own initiative on the occasion of a publication in the media related to a decision of the Council of Ministers of 7 May 2020 on the transfer of European and national funds amounting to BGN 30,964,149 (approximately EUR 15 million) from the Operational Program "Science and Education for Intelligent Growth" 2014-2020, for socio-economic measures to deal with the epidemic, vulnerable groups and the affected economic sectors of the Bulgarian economy [3].

They should be transformed into the the Human Resources Development Operational Programme - in the amount of BGN 28,790,507 (about EUR 14.7

million) and into the Operational Program "Innovation and Competitiveness" - in the amount of BGN 2,155,642. (approximately EUR 1.1 million) In another decision to the Operational Program for Innovation and Competitiveness, the Council of Ministers redirected a resource from the transport and environment programs in the amount of BGN 134 million (approximately EUR 68 million).

The Supreme Administrative Prosecutor's Office requested information on the actions taken so far by the competent executive structures, which should contain data on the projects on which such funds have been spent so far in order to support the fight against COVID-19 - what they are specifically used for and how much they are.

In view of the measures taken by the Government to limit the negative economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, large cash flows are allocated in the form of aid and support schemes to the private sector. We recognize that there is a need for serious monitoring of the procedures for the utilization of these funds, as there is a prerequisite for the development of a corrupt environment.

Conclusion. It is also possible for the beneficiaries of this aid to take acts of corruption, as well as counterfeiting of documents in order to meet the necessary requirements for receiving state aid. In this regard, alerts alleging such unlawful acts shall be considered with caution and speed, in order to prevent the waste of public resources that should be used as intended to overcome the negative economic consequences of the pandemic [5-6].

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