

Copy of A comment on the introduction of an EU-funds "hotline" with Deputy PM Plugtschieva

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By Juliana Nikolova, Director of the European Institute.

A public hotline was opened to Deputy PM Plugtschieva's office on June 23, the Government Information Service announced. On the sixtieth day since her appointment in charge of the EU Funds absorption, she committed herself to responding to citizens' complaints, concerns and questions, related to the EU Funds management and absorption process within 30 days.

The new hotline is one of the measures, undertaken by Mrs. Plugtschieva, for ensuring transparency and control of the Community financial resources management.

Where the responsibility for the transparency and control of the national, Bulgarian, financial resources rests, at this stage appears to remain a mystery; yet, there is always a beginning. The citizens should just leave their phone number or email address and the automatic line will put the experts' team in motion to answer them.

Why the press-release of the Government Information Service does not include an email-address corresponding to the free hotline performing the same functions is a PR secret that is not easy to decipher. Having in mind that the busy and active people are much more likely to use the internet for communication purposes, if only because the line is never busy makes it even more cryptic.

It is too soon even for forecasts. The system should be tested first; it will take a month to see if and how it works. And in a month's time we will evaluate the effect — and the Deputy PM respectively — because it is the common practice for the politicians in the government to report on their 100th day in office.

The alleged eternal Bulgarian distrust drove me to be among the first to use the "hotline"; asking **my fist questions**. In thirty days exactly I will make public the received answers, if any and as are. Unfortunately, it will coincide with the release of the notorious Cooperation and Verification Mechanism Report of the EC and everybody will be busy commenting on it. The common expectations are that it will hardly contain anything inspiring or optimistic. However this little experiment and its outcome in particular, will be a good sign of the possibility for a change and of whether there is light in the tunnel.

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Following a provoked audit of the National Road Infrastructure Fund, made by an internationally-recognized auditing company, the Deputy PM and foreign minister Ivailo Kalfin declared that the Government has decided to provide state-budget financing, substituting the EU funding of European road infrastructure projects frozen **as a result of established or suspected irregularities**. Some of them due to confirmed or potential conflict of interests.

The regulations related to the management of Community resources require, in the case of established irregularities, that the Member State undertakes the necessary corrective actions to collect the amounts unduly paid. Other directives demand invalidation of the contracts, if the selection procedure for the contracting was proved illegitimate (conflict of interests makes it such). It is another matter how this is introduced in the Bulgarian legislation).

First question: The substituting financing will be provided from the republican budget. Will there be new selection procedures for new contractors of these projects?

If yes, how will the National Road Infrastructure Fund, which is apparently the contracting authority, carry out these procedures within reasonable time, having in mind that it is in the process of restructuring and the level of trust to it is extremely low?

If no, how will contractors, selected through illegitimate procedures, implement valid contracts?

Second question: To whom will the requests for recovering amounts unduly paid be addressed? What is their amount and how solid the chances of recovering them?

Third question: What responsibility will be taken by those who have allowed the conflict of interests – from the part of the evaluating committees and from the part of the project contractors?

There are plenty of other questions, but three will suffice for a test. For the answers to be received, in my phone call I have given the email address of the European institute.

Editor's note: Europe.bg Gateway presents Mrs. Nikolova's comment, written on June 23, 2008. We will continue following the topic further on.

All reactions by readers about the "hot line" are welcome through our email info@europe.bg or in the comment's space beyond this publication.