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Bulgaria is about to lose a huge part of the EU funding allocated to the country in preparation for joining the Schengen passport-free zone, Dnevnik daily commented. In two years the institutions have only managed to put 1.4% of the funds into use - 4.355 million leva out of 161 million (about 315 million BGN). Negotiations for the money are to end by December, and the deadline for the implementation of the projects is October, 2010.

The programme aims to strengthen the external borders of the EU and to prepare the administration to eliminate the borders between Bulgaria and the other member states. According to the most optimistic expectations so far our country is to join Schengen on March 1st, 2011.

The last announcement in the public procurement register at the Ministry of finance from January shows that for yet another year the administration of Minister Plamen Oresharski publishes calls for the same projects. The biggest project is for control and video surveillance of the Bulgarian-Turkish border. The tender is for 12 million euros and has taken place once in the end of 2008.

Since the beginning of the programme in 2007 11 tenders have been announced, 9 of which have been suspended.

The funds for the Schengen programme are managed by the Central finance and contracts unit at the Ministry of Finance. Brussels revoked its accreditation of the unit last year. "The programme is very specific and the companies have difficulties to prepare the documentation for participation correctly, which leads to their disqualification", representatives of the Ministry of Finance told Dnevnik. The officials also added that they are only the contracting authority for the tenders whereas the actual beneficiary is mainly the Ministry of Interior which is the one to prepare the projects.

According to a source close to the Ministry of Interior, the administration of Mihail Mihov is still not ready with its Schengen programme for 2009 which may result in a significant delay of the tenders.

European Affairs Minister Gergana Grancharova warned about the possibility to lose the European aid less than a month ago. However Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Kalin Slavov explained that in case of loss of EU funding the projects for implementation of Schengen criteria would be funded by Bulgarian budget and there was no need to worry.

According to European Commission officials one of the most serious weaknesses for Bulgaria is the lack of auditing inside the ministries responsible for EU funds. At the same time last year's commission for choice of an auditor to help the Ministry of Finance with Schengen was stopped. The reason for canceling the tender was that the commission had found a lack of pricing criteria in the methodology of evaluation of the offers. There was no second call. Another administrative mistake hinders the tender for border cutters - there was no independent consultant in the committee.

Experts from "Justice and Internal Affairs" Directorate in EC will start a check-up in March to examine the progress of Bulgaria on joining Schengen. Their first mission is evaluation of police cooperation. A check-up of personal data protection is coming up in April. A mission will come in June in regard the visa issues. That means that by then Bulgaria needs to be ready with biometric data in passports.