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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

Early-Detection and Exclusion System (EDES) - Panel referred to in Article 143 of the Financial Regulation

Accompanying the document

REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

35th Annual Report on the protection of the European Union's fiancial interests and the fight against fraud - 2023

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1. Introduction

The Early Detection and Exclusion System (EDES) was established by the Commission to strengthen the protection of the EU's financial interests and to ensure compliance with the principle of sound financial management when implementing the budget, in accordance with Article 317 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. In particular, the EDES enables authorising officers to exclude unreliable operators from EU funding for a limited number of years.

More specifically, EDES covers:

- ➤ the early detection of persons and entities presenting a risk to the EU's financial interests;
- > the exclusion of persons and entities from participating in award procedures or from being selected to implement EU funds;
- > the imposition of a financial penalty;
- ➤ the publication on the Commission's internet site of information related to the exclusion and, where applicable, the financial penalty, in order to reinforce their deterrent effect, in the most severe cases.

The EDES rules are set out in Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 (the 'Financial Regulation') (¹) and the Rules of Procedure of the Panel (²). They provide for a robust structure which includes the setting-up of a panel (the 'EDES Panel' or the 'Panel') and the creation of a central database.

EDES, which currently applies to direct and indirect management, ensures an independent and centralised assessment of exclusion situations, and respect for the fundamental rights of the person and entities concerned (³).

⁽¹) Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 July 2018 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the EU, amending Regulations (EU) No 1296/2013, (EU) No 1301/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1304/2013, (EU) No 1309/2013, (EU) No 1316/2013, (EU) No 223/2014, (EU) No 283/2014, and Decision No 541/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 966/2012, OJ L 193 of 30.7.2018, p. 1.

⁽²⁾ Commission Decision (EU) 2018/1220 of 6 September 2018 on the rules of procedure of the panel referred to in Article 143 of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and of the Council (OJ L 226, 7.9.2018, p. 7).

⁽³⁾ Protection of the EU financial interest has been strengthened by the political agreement on the Financial Regulation recast of 7 December 2023. The co-legislators agreed to extend the scope of the system, for the most serious offences (e.g. fraud, corruption, money-laundering activities), to shared management funds and funds disbursed under direct management with Member States. The amendment will be in force for programmes adopted or financed as from 1 January 2028.

In this respect, it constitutes a key instrument for ensuring the effective protection of the EU's financial interests through the adoption of administrative measures, while national authorities remain responsible for adopting sanctions, including criminal sanctions (⁴).

This Staff Working Document presents the activity of the EDES Panel in 2023 and the first months of 2024.

2. THE PANEL

The key responsibility of the Panel is to issue recommendations on the adoption of administrative measures (i.e. exclusion and/or financial penalty and, where applicable, the publication of information related to these actions), following a request from a competent authorising officer from any of the EU institutions, agencies, offices and bodies. After assessment of the case, the Panel addresses its recommendation to the requesting authorising officer.

In addition, under Article 93 of the Financial Regulation, the Panel is also responsible for giving an opinion or making a recommendation where financial irregularities may have been committed by a member of staff of an EU institution or body.

The Panel centralises the requests from authorising officers, ensures the coherent operation of the system, carries out a preliminary classification in law of the misconduct and upholds the right of defence for persons or entities involved in an adversarial procedure. In addition, the Panel assesses the remedial measures submitted by a person or entity to demonstrate its reliability.

2.1. Composition of the Panel

As laid down in Article 143 of the Financial Regulation, the Panel is composed of:

- a standing high-level independent Chair;
- two permanent members representing the Commission as owner of EDES, who express a joint position on each case submitted to the Panel; and
- one representative of the requesting authorising officer.

The chair of the Panel and their deputy are appointed by the Commission (5) and are independent in the performance of their duties (6). They are chosen from among former

⁽⁴⁾ Contrary to what had been the norm with previous versions of the Financial Regulation, which provided for the imposition of administrative sanctions on unreliable economic operators, in the current Financial Regulation, adopted in 2018, the purpose of EDES is not punitive but aims solely to protect the EU's financial interests, by stopping unreliable entities from accessing EU funds, albeit for a limited period and, at the same time, deterring them from misbehaving once they are allowed to benefit from those funds again.

members of the Court of Justice of the EU, the Court of Auditors or former officials who have held the rank of Director-General or higher in an EU institution other than the Commission. Their independence is guaranteed by the fact that their term of office is limited and non-renewable.

The current chair of the Panel, Ms Maria Isabel Rofes i Pujol, is a former judge at the European Union Civil Service Tribunal, and was appointed in November 2021. Her deputy is Mr Igors Ludboržs, a former Member of the European Court of Auditors.

The two permanent members of the Panel representing the Commission in 2023 were Mr Hubert Szlaszewski, Principal Adviser in the Secretariat General of the Commission, and Mr Olivier Waelbroeck, currently Principal Adviser for Legal and Financial Issues, Rule of Law, Fraud Prevention and EDES and, previously, Director of the Central Financial Service in DG BUDGET (7). In March 2023, Mr Kristian Vangrieken, a senior staff member of the Commission DG BUDGET took over the mandate of Mr Hubert Szlaszewski who had retired.

For each case, the l member representing the requesting authorising officer is designated according to the internal administrative rules of the institution, agency, office or body concerned.

When dealing with cases of internal financial irregularities by EU staff pursuant to Article 93 of the Financial Regulation, the Panel includes the Chair, the two permanent members representing the Commission, and three additional members:

- a representative of the competent appointing authority;
- a member appointed by the competent staff committee; and
- a member of the legal service of the EU institution concerned.

The Panel is assisted by observers, who take part in the Panel's deliberations without voting rights. The Commission's Legal Service is a permanent observer to the Panel's meetings. Where a referral to the Panel stems from an investigation by the European Anti-fraud Office (OLAF) by the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), representatives of OLAF and EPPO participate in the Panel's meetings as observers. Their attendance enables the Panel to be informed first-hand of: (i) the facts and findings resulting from an OLAF/EPPO investigation; (ii) the estimated financial impact of the

- (6) Article 144(3) of the Financial Regulation.
- (7) Deputies of the Permanent Members are Mr Rene Slootjes, Head of Unit in the Secretariat-General of the Commission designated *ad personam* and Mr Alessandro Nucara, Head of Unit in the Central Financial Service in the Directorate-General for Budget.

⁽⁵⁾ The rules applicable to the Deputies are to be found in the Rules of Procedure of the Panel. The Rules of Procedure regulate, i.a. the appointment, termination of appointment and dismissal of the Chair and deputy.

misconduct; (iii) the procedural guarantees accorded to the persons and entities concerned; (iv) actions taken by national judicial authorities, if any. The active participation of the Commission's Legal Service, OLAF and EPPO in the Panel's work is key to ensuring that the Panel delivers high-quality recommendations. In addition, authorising officers (other than the referring authority) who are concerned by the case referred to the Panel may participate in its meetings as observers.

The Panel is supported by a permanent secretariat provided by the Directorate-General for Budget of the European Commission.

The Panel operates under its own set of procedural rules, which serve to implement and complement Article 143 of the Financial Regulation (8). These rules are designed to achieve two main objectives: (i) regulate the internal functioning of the Panel; and (ii) provide all parties involved, including persons or entities subject to an exclusion procedure, with clear guidance on their rights and obligations.

2.2. Role of the Panel

Under the Financial Regulation (9), in the absence of a final judgment – or, where applicable, a final administrative decision – the authorising officer who intends to exclude and/or fine unreliable persons or entities must first request a recommendation from the Panel. The grounds for exclusion that require a Panel recommendation are the following (10):

- grave professional misconduct resulting from: (i) the violation of applicable laws or regulations or ethical standards of the profession to which the economic operator concerned belongs, or (ii) the engagement in any wrongful conduct which has an impact on professional credibility where such conduct denotes wrongful intent or gross negligence;
- fraud, corruption, participation in a criminal organisation, money laundering or terrorist financing, terrorist-related offences or offences linked to terrorist activities, and child labour or other forms of trafficking in human beings;
- significant deficiencies in complying with main obligations in performing a contract financed by the budget ('serious breach of obligations'), which: (i) has led to early termination of the contract or to the application of liquidated damages or other contractual penalties; or (ii) has been discovered following checks, audits or investigations by an authorising officer, OLAF or the Court of Auditors;

⁽⁸⁾ Commission Decision (EU) 2018/1220 of 6 September 2018 on the rules of procedure of the panel referred to in Article 143 of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and of the Council (OJ L 226, 7.9.2018, p. 7).

⁽⁹⁾ See Article 136 of the Financial Regulation.

⁽¹⁰⁾ See Article 136(2) of the Financial Regulation.

- irregularity within the meaning of Article 1(2) of Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No 2988/95 (11) and;
- the creation or use of a shell company in a different jurisdiction from the one of the registered office, central administration or principal place of business, with the intent to circumvent fiscal, social or any other legal obligations.

In general, each case is assessed by the Panel in two phases. Firstly, the Panel reviews the facts established, performs an initial legal qualification, and opens an adversarial procedure with the person or entity concerned. Secondly, the Panel examines written observations and adopts a recommendation, addressed to the requesting authorising officer.

In principle, the Panel must adopt its recommendation within 3 months from the opening of the case. A case is opened when the chair verifies that the file is complete because it contains all the necessary documents and information, and the Panel is in a position to establish a preliminary classification in law, with a view to notifying the person or entity concerned thereof and starting the adversarial procedure.

To ensure the right to be heard of the person or entity concerned, the Panel sends an adversarial letter inviting them to submit written observations within 3 weeks. In response to a duly warranted request, the deadline may be extended by no more than half the period initially granted. Where the nature or the circumstances of the case require that it is given priority (e.g. ongoing award procedures; risk of time-barring of the facts), the Panel strives to act swiftly, without prejudice to the right of defence of the person or entity concerned.

The Panel has no investigative powers. Therefore, when assessing the facts and findings established against the person or entity, the Panel relies, among other things, on:

- a) facts established through audits or investigations carried out by: (i) EPPO; (ii) the European Court of Auditors; (iii) OLAF; (iv) internal audits; or (v) any other check, audit or control performed under the responsibility of the authorising officer;
- b) non-final administrative decisions, which may include disciplinary measures taken by the competent supervisory body responsible for verifying the application of professional ethical standards;
- c) facts referred to in decisions of persons and entities implementing EU funds under indirect management (12);

directly on behalf of the Communities, or by an unjustified item of expenditure.'

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⁽¹¹⁾ Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No 2988/95 of 18 December 1995 on the protection of the European Communities financial interests (OJ L 312, 23.12.1995, p. 1) which defines irregularity as: 'any infringement of a provision of Community law resulting from an act or omission by an economic operator, which has, or would have, the effect of prejudicing the general budget of the Communities or budgets managed by them, either by reducing or losing revenue accruing from own resources collected

- d) information sent by entities implementing EU funds under shared management with Member States; and
- e) decisions of: (i) the Commission relating to the infringement of the EU's competition rules; or (ii) a national competent authority relating to the infringement of EU or national competition law.

The relevant documents and evidence pertaining to the relevant case, whether inculpatory or exculpatory, are then disclosed to the person or entity concerned in the context of the adversarial procedure, together with the preliminary classification in law of the facts established and the envisaged measure to be recommended.

2.3. Recommendation of the Panel

The outcome of the adversarial procedure is a recommendation issued by the Panel to the referring authorising officer on the need (or not) to adopt an administrative measure in the case at issue.

Where the Panel finds that a person or entity should be excluded, or a financial penalty imposed, the recommendation outlines the facts warranting the measure, their preliminary classification in law, as well as the outcome of the adversarial proceedings led by the Panel.

The Panel's recommendation typically includes the following:

- a) a comprehensive description of the facts and findings established against the person or entity concerned;
- b) a summary of the observations put forward by the person or entity concerned;
- c) an all-circumstances analysis of misconduct, including its seriousness, the degree of intention, the financial impact on the EU's budget;
- d) where applicable, an analysis of remedial measures adopted by the person or entity concerned;
- e) recommended duration of the exclusion and/or amount of the financial penalty;
- f) an evaluation of whether publication of the measure is necessary to reinforce its deterrent effect.

⁽¹²⁾ For example, by the European Central Bank; the European Investment Bank; the European Investment Fund; international organisations; non-EU countries, or the bodies designated by non-EU countries and Member States.

The Panel has the authority to recommend an exclusion from participating in award procedures or from being selected for implementing EU funds for up to 3 or 5 years, depending on the type of misconduct (¹³).

Additionally, the Panel may recommend a financial penalty, capped at 10% of the total value of the legal commitment. This penalty may serve as an alternative to exclusion in cases where exclusion would be deemed disproportionate, or it may be imposed in addition to the exclusion in cases of systemic or recurrent misconduct. However, a financial penalty cannot be imposed on a recipient who has voluntarily disclosed that they have been excluded.

Finally, the Panel may recommend the publication of the measure on the <u>European</u> Commission website $(^{14})$ of the administrative measure eventually adopted, to reinforce its deterrent effect $(^{15})$.

The Panel's recommendation is not binding and the referring authorising officer can deviate from it. In such cases, the authorising officer must justify their decision to the Panel. Furthermore, under Article 143 of the Financial Regulation, if the authorising officer intends to take more severe administrative action than that recommended by the Panel they must make sure that their decision is taken with due respect for the person or entity's right to be heard. To date, such a situation has never occurred.

3. COOPERATION WITH OLAF

Since the Panel lacks investigative powers, the use of information stemming from OLAF investigations and Final Reports is key to the success and effectiveness of the exclusion system and the protection of the financial interests of the EU.

In accordance with the OLAF Regulation (¹⁶), the Financial Regulation and the Panel's Rules of Procedure, authorising officers may use the information stemming from or

⁽¹³⁾ A maximum duration of 3 years is provided for the following grounds: grave professional misconduct, significant deficiencies in complying with main obligations in the implementation of a legal commitment, irregularity, or intentional circumvention of fiscal, social, or other legal obligations. A maximum duration of 5 years is provided for the most serious misconducts: fraud, corruption, conduct related to a criminal organisation, money laundering or terrorist financing, terrorist offences or offences linked to terrorist activities, child labour or trafficking of human beings.

⁽¹⁴⁾ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/how-it-works/annual-lifecycle/implementation/anti-fraud-measures/edes/edes-database_en.

⁽¹⁵⁾ The time frame the publication of the measure is strictly limited to the duration of the exclusion. Information on the measure cannot be published in any of the following circumstances: (i) where it is necessary to preserve the confidentiality of an investigation or of national judicial proceedings; (ii) where publication would cause disproportionate damage to the economic operator concerned or would otherwise be disproportionate on the basis of the proportionality criteria set out and to the amount of the financial penalty; and (iii) where a natural person is concerned, unless the publication of personal data is exceptionally justified, among other things by the seriousness of the conduct or its impact on the EU's financial interests.

relating to OLAF investigations to request a recommendation from the EDES Panel. In fact, OLAF reports are the source of information for most Panel referrals (¹⁷).

If the information collected by OLAF as part of its investigation is subject to strict rules of confidentiality and protection of personal data, as stipulated in Article 10 of the OLAF Regulation, the information communicated to the person or entity during the adversarial proceedings must often be redacted before it is submitted to the Panel (¹⁸).

Only in exceptional circumstances, where there are compelling legitimate grounds to preserve the confidentiality of an investigation, of national judicial or EPPO proceedings, can the right to be heard be deferred.

This rule applies *mutatis mutandis* to information stemming from the EPPO in order to protect the investigative and prosecutorial tasks assigned to it, as well as to all documents used by the Panel, in particular audit reports.

During the reporting period, the Panel, its Secretariat and OLAF have sought to enhance their cooperation on the matter and to further clarify how information stemming from or relating to OLAF investigations may be used by the authorising officer in the context of Panel proceedings.

4. THE WORK OF THE CURRENT PANEL

The Panel chaired by Ms Rofes i Pujol has continued to develop its practice and delved deeper into several significant fields of interest by:

- interpreting and clarifying the set of rules on exclusion enshrined in the successive versions of the Financial Regulation;
- taking into account other applicable legal rules and general principles of law which lie at the intersection of EU administrative and budget law, competition law, contractual law, criminal law, as well as national law;
- establishing a set of precedents and drawing out principles for the coherent and effective application of the system of administrative measures to be adopted with regard to unreliable persons and entities.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 883/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 September 2013 concerning investigations conducted by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1073/1999 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Regulation (Euratom) No 1074/1999 (OJ L 248 18.9.2013, p. 1).

⁽¹⁷⁾ OLAF reports represent 54% of the referral sources of the Panel cases.

⁽¹⁸⁾ In practice, most OLAF reports and their annexes must be redacted.

A notable example of the Panel's work in 2023 was its role in the treatment of financial irregularities on the part of a member of staff (¹⁹). The case was referred for an opinion by the appointing authority in charge of disciplinary matters, on the basis of an OLAF investigation, which unveiled a breach of ethical standards and non-disclosure of conflicts of interest during an award procedure. The analysis of the facts led the Panel to identify a systemic problem in the interpretation of the applicable rules, in particular whether the obligation for members of staff to declare a risk of a conflict of interest had to be fulfilled in writing or an oral declaration to the hierarchy sufficed. Consequently, a recommendation was addressed to the authorising officers of the Commission urging clarity in interpreting and enforcing the relevant rules and procedures.

Throughout the reporting period, the complexity of cases referred to the Panel by authorising officers dramatically increased. These cases often required exhaustive and protracted deliberations to ensure fair and just recommendations. Such complexity stemmed from various factors, including the extended duration of misconduct, its legal qualification, and occasionally, the complex assessment of the available evidence.

A point of attention in the work of the Panel is the reliability of the sources underpinning the facts and findings which ground the preliminary classification in law of a case of misconduct. Since the Panel has no investigative powers, it relies heavily on the checks and investigations carried out by other EU bodies (e.g. OLAF, EPPO), as well as on the adversarial phase of the EDES procedure run with the person or entity concerned.

It is important to note a recent judgment delivered by the General Court (²⁰), which annulled an exclusion decision taken by an Commission authorising officer acting on a Panel recommendation. The Court considered that the facts and findings resulting from an OLAF investigation were not conclusive enough to demonstrate a grave professional misconduct. Accordingly, they did not allow the authorising officer to exclude the applicant from participating in procedures for the award of EU funds (²¹).

This ruling underscores the importance of robust legal scrutiny and serves as a critical reminder to the Panel and the authorising officers of the need for attention to legal principles and the safeguarding of procedural rights in administrative proceedings.

5. ASSESSMENT OF REMEDIAL MEASURES

Under the Financial Regulation (²²), the authorising officer, having regard, where applicable, to the Panel's recommendation, may not exclude a person or entity that has taken remedial measures to an extent sufficient to demonstrate its reliability.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Article 93 of the Financial Regulation.

⁽²⁰⁾ Judgement of 15.2.2023, Case T-175/21, RH v Commission.

⁽²¹⁾ *Ibidem*, par. 114.

⁽²²⁾ Articles 136(6)(a) and 136(7) of the Financial Regulation.

Where such measures are submitted by a person or entity as part of the adversarial procedure led by the Panel, the latter must assess them thoroughly before adopting its recommendation.

Conversely, where an exclusion has been adopted, the authorising officer or the person or entity concerned may request the Panel to revise its recommendation on the basis of (new) remedial measures taken (23).

Remedial measures are assessed in two main stages: (i) evaluation of the measures, which are scrutinised against the criteria outlined in Article 136(7) of the Financial Regulation; and (ii) assessment of whether they have been taken to an extent that is sufficient to demonstrate the entity's reliability. This case-by-case assessment, which is inherently contingent upon the circumstances of the misconduct at issue, considers various factors, including the evidence on the implementation of the measures, whether a tangible change in the corporate culture has occurred, the management structure, as well as any independent evaluation performed on the measures and provided to the Panel for evaluation.

If the measures are deemed sufficient to demonstrate reliability, exclusion is ruled out, and the recommendation states the reasons for reaching this conclusion (²⁴). However, if the Panel or the authorising officer finds that the proposed remedial measures do not meet the requirements of the Financial Regulation, they might still be considered in the proportionality assessment (²⁵).

6. OVERVIEW OF CASES REFERRED TO THE PANEL

In 2023, 13 referrals by authorising officers reached the Panel through its permanent secretariat. In addition, 6 referrals have already been submitted in the first five months of 2024. Out of these referrals, 1 case concerned a member of staff (²⁶) and 1 case concerned the revision of a prior recommendation.

In 2023 and the first 5 months of 2024, the Panel issued 7 recommendations, 2 of which concerned cases filed and opened in 2022 and 2 opinions regarding a member of staff under Article 93 of the Financial Regulation.

Concerning the decisions of (non-) exclusion adopted so far, all have been taken by the authorising officers, acting on a recommendation from the Panel.

The following table gives an overview of the above-referenced recommendations with a summary of: (i) facts and findings; (ii) where applicable, the preliminary classification in

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⁽²³⁾ Article 136(8) of the Financial Regulation.

⁽²⁴⁾ Article 143(6)(e) of the Financial Regulation.

⁽²⁵⁾ Article 136(3) of the Financial Regulation.

⁽²⁶⁾ Article 93 of the Financial Regulation.

law of these facts and findings; (iii) the recommended measure to be adopted and the date that it took effect; and (iv) information on whether publication on the website of the Commission was recommended. The cases have been anonymised.

Annex 1 - Summary of anonymised cases referred to the Panel under Article 143 of the Financial Regulation $(^{27})$

Recommendation number	Facts	Classification in law (exclusion grounds)	Date of the Panel recommendation or opinion	Recommended actions	Recommended publication	Date of decision of the authorising officer responsible
Opinion No 2023/1	Financial irregularity: non- disclosure of a conflict of interest.	Member of staff, financial irregularity	25/01/2023	N/A	N/A	N/A
Opinion No 2023/2	Financial irregularity: non- disclosure of a conflict of interest.	Member of staff, financial irregularity	30/06/2023	N/A	N/A	N/A
Rec No 2023/01	The entity manipulated the tender procedure through unlawful access to tender confidential information and conflict of interest.	Grave professional misconduct.	06/01/2023	N/A	N/A	N/A
Rec No 2023/02	The entity set up a system of manipulation of costs and creation of false invoices	Serious breach of contract.	22/05/2023	N/A	N/A	N/A

^{(&}lt;sup>27</sup>) Only finalised cases are included.

Rec No 2023/03	The entity has been engaged in wrongful conduct, which has an impact on its professional credibility. The entity fraudulently misrepresented information required for the verification of the absence of grounds for exclusion or the fulfilment of eligibility or selection criteria or in the implementation of the legal commitment.	Grave professional misconduct.	30/06/2023	Exclusion for a 2- year period, registration as person of interest	Yes	08/09/2023
Rec No 2023/04	The entity failed to inform the contracting authority of the fact that their expert was engaged in parallel employment and not complying with the provisions applicable to staff.	Serious breach of contract. Grave professional misconduct.	21/08/2023	N/A	N/A	N/A
Rec No 2023/05	Failure to abide by the contractual obligations, disclosing and making use of confidential information.	Serious breach of contract.	15/12/2023	Exclusion for an 18- month period	N/A	04/03/2024
Rec No 2024/01	Wrongful conduct such as fraudulently misrepresenting information required for the fulfilment of selection criteria and performance of a contract.	Grave professional misconduct.	19/01/2024	N/A	N/A	N/A
Rec No 2024/02	The entity failed to inform the Contracting Authority about an existing conflict of interest of which they were aware.	Grave professional misconduct.	28/05/2024	Exclusion for a 9-month period	N/A	N/A
Rec No 2024/03	The entity entered into agreement with other economic operators with the aim of distorting competition.	Grave professional misconduct.	07/06/2024	N/A	N/A	N/A