Summary

Nature, Specificity and Legal Framework of the Protection of the Financial Interests of the European Union

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The doctoral dissertation examines the protection of the financial interests of the European Union as a complex and strategically significant field of European integration. Rather than treating it as a merely technical matter of fraud control, budgetary oversight or criminal prosecution, the dissertation approaches it as part of the Union's broader institutional, legal and constitutional evolution. Recent developments, including the establishment of the European Public Prosecutor's Office, the adoption of the PIF Directive, the introduction of rule-of-law conditionality Regulation and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, show that this field has expanded beyond sectoral financial control into a functional system through which the Union safeguards its budget, strengthens enforcement capacity and shapes institutional behavior at both EU and national levels.

The **central problem** addressed by the dissertation is the absence of a clear and generally accepted answer to the question: what is the protection of the financial interests of the European Union? The term is widely used in EU law, institutional documents, academic literature and judicial practice, yet it remains conceptually underdefined. This leads to doctrinal inconsistency, practical uncertainty, normative ambiguity and linguistic imprecision, especially in the multilingual legal environment of the European Union. The dissertation therefore aims to overcome this fragmentation by developing a systematic conceptual framework capable of explaining the nature, specificity and legal structure of the field.

The **working hypothesis** of the research is that the protection of the EU's financial interests constitutes a system composed of interrelated elements working towards a common function. Because this system has so far been studied in a fragmented manner, its nature, main components and operational logic have not been sufficiently clarified. The main objective of the dissertation is therefore to systematize the protection of the EU's financial interests, reveal its defining characteristics and formulate a doctrinal definition that can serve both as an analytical tool for researchers and as a practical reference point for institutions, experts and legislators.

Methodologically, the dissertation combines historical-evolutionary analysis, classical legal analysis, systems thinking and a practical-applied approach. The historical-evolutionary method traces the development of the field from the early stages of European integration in 1952 to its contemporary state by the end of 2024. The systems approach is used to identify the elements, links and general function of the system. The legal analysis examines primary and secondary EU law, international legal instruments, case-law, institutional documents and academic literature. The practical-applied dimension identifies contemporary problems affecting the functioning of the system and proposes institutional and methodological solutions, particularly from the perspective of the Bulgarian administration.

The research is **structured around two main analytical vectors**. The first concerns the development of the legal framework governing the protection of the EU's financial interests. This includes contextual processes such as case-law, analytical work and sectoral legal acts, as well as directly relevant processes relating to primary EU law, secondary EU law and international legal instruments. The second vector concerns the development of the administrative infrastructure responsible for implementing and enforcing the relevant rules. This infrastructure includes specialized administrative bodies, the legal framework governing their activities, and coordination mechanisms for collecting, exchanging and analyzing information relevant to the protection of the EU budget.

The **first chapter** follows the **historical development of the field through four major stages**. The **first stage**, covering the period from 1952 to 1989, marked by the emergence of the need to protect Community financial resources and by the gradual formation of general principles relevant to the field. **The second stage**, from 1989 to 1997, is characterized by consolidation, analysis and the search for practical legal solutions. **The third stage**, from 1998 to 2007, is dominated by optimization and institutional restructuring. **The fourth stage**, from 2007 to 2017, follows the post-Lisbon period and

the realization of two major integration objectives: the adoption of a new substantive criminal-law framework for offences affecting the EU budget and the establishment of an EU-level prosecutorial body.

The second chapter examines the current state of the system from 2017 to the end of 2024, formulates a doctrinal definition and addresses selected practical problems. The dissertation argues that the period after 2017 represents the most significant transformation of the criminal-law vector of the system. The transposition of the PIF Directive and the operationalization of the European Public Prosecutor's Office have created a functioning European enforcement mechanism directed at the protection of the common budget. In parallel, Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092 has connected the protection of the EU budget with the rule of law, thereby moving the field beyond purely operational enforcement and into the sphere of constitutional and political governance.

On the basis of the historical and systemic analysis, the dissertation formulates the following definition:

the protection of the financial interests of the European Union is a system of principles, policies and norms, guaranteed by European and national administrative infrastructure, aimed at preventing, detecting and investigating unlawful conduct that negatively affects the proper, effective and efficient formation and expenditure of the budget of the European Union and of its institutions, bodies, offices and agencies, which also includes actions after such unlawful conduct has been determined.

This definition identifies the object, function and institutional basis of the system while preserving the flexibility necessary for future developments, such as new forms of irregular conduct, hybrid threats, technological risks and further institutional integration.

The dissertation also **examines the practical consequences of the EU's multilingual legal order**. It argues that legal translation in the EU should not be mechanical linguistic exercise, but a legally relevant analytical act with constitutive significance. Bulgarian practice reveals functional inconsistencies in the use of key terms such as fraud, serious irregularity, beneficiary and related concepts. The dissertation proposes a more structured methodology for legal-linguistic translation and the creation of a national coordination mechanism capable of performing both preventive and corrective functions.

Finally, the dissertation analyses **two major practical challenges** for the Bulgarian administration. The first concerns the Recovery and Resilience Facility, particularly the difficulties connected with performance-based financing, the measurement of effectiveness, the treatment of serious irregularities and the mapping of institutional competence along the chain of planning, implementation, evaluation and correction. The second concerns the conditionality mechanism under Regulation 2020/2092. Drawing on the Hungarian case, Commission guidance and the work of the European Court of Auditors, the dissertation recommends the systematic analysis of rule-of-law-related case-law, the structured examination of relevant institutional reports, and the development of mechanisms for assessing complaints falling within the potential scope of the Regulation.

The **dissertation's contributions** are conceptual, historical-systemic and practical. Conceptually, it offers a functional and adaptive definition of the protection of the EU's financial interests, filling an important gap in legal scholarship. Historically and systemically, it reconstructs the evolution of the field from its early foundations to its contemporary state and identifies the main stages of its development. Practically, it proposes concrete mechanisms for improving national administrative capacity in highly sensitive areas connected to EU budget protection.The dissertation concludes that the protection of the EU's financial interests has evolved from a general necessity into a central functional system of the European Union. From the Greek Maize case to Regulation 2020/2092, from UCLAF to the European Public Prosecutor's Office, and from sectoral provisions to the possible future adoption of a PIF Regulation, the field reflects the Union's gradual movement towards deeper integration, stronger enforcement capacity and more complex forms of shared governance. Its future development should be guided not by integration as an end in itself, but by functionality, institutional balance and the preservation of trust between national sovereignty and European integration.