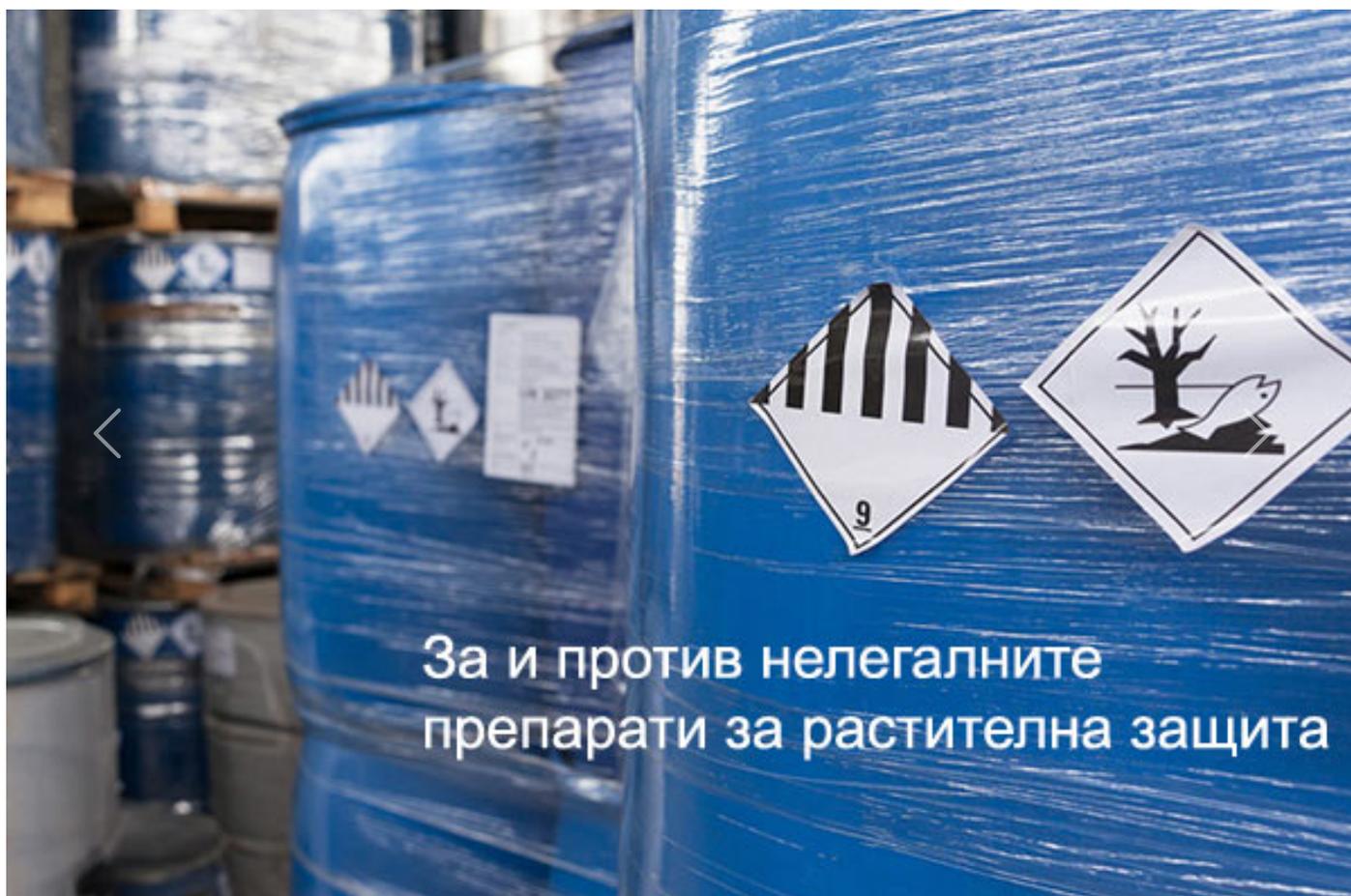


Criminalization of the illegal import and trade in PPPs unauthorized for use is not to everyone's liking

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The highly valuable mission – to bring transparency to the trade in plant protection products in Bulgaria – has finally seen the light of day, has been noticed at the highest level of governance and is on the way (following the adoption of the Act amending and supplementing the Criminal Code) to receive legal protection and regulated mechanisms for counteracting illegal and unfair competition.

What happens, however, after this key event? Instead of witnessing universal joy and satisfaction from the victory of common sense and the pragmatic approach, from the victory in the interest of society as a whole – pesticide traders, agricultural producers, consumers, to which we add the purely environmental effects – we are confronted with absurd speculations, the notorious Bulgarian scepticism, dependencies and insinuations, theatrical posturing and ludicrous claims...

Since the topical issue – blocking the channels for abuse with counterfeit and unauthorised pesticide products – has become the focus of special attention from certain persons who demonstrate hyperactivity, mainly on social networks, against this particularly important decision of the Council of Ministers in favour of the legal business, I will try impartially to respond at least to part of those dissatisfied with the new situation.

Just one fact. As a result of inspections under the international operation SILVER AXE V, coordinated by Europol and OLAF, more than 25 tonnes of illegally imported plant protection products were seized in our country last year. It is an open secret that one of the channels for this unregulated import has Turkey as its address. This seems a sufficiently sound reason for some of our agribusinessmen, concerned about the health of our compatriots, to insistently ask why, if plant protection products from Turkey are harmful, we continue to import vegetables and fruit from there.

At first glance this position is to a sufficient extent logical. But is it really so? I will take vegetables as an example, as they have a more important role and share than fruit in the food chain. In no way does this choice mean that fruit are being neglected; I am doing it so that we do not deviate from the main objective. So. In its capacity as an external border of the EU, Bulgaria has a particularly responsible role. In this case, Bulgarian phytosanitary control at the checkpoints with Turkey is at a very high level – both from the point of view of professional expertise and from the point of view of technical equipment. All incoming consignments of vegetables are monitored under a magnifying glass. The assessments and analyses are comprehensive and detailed – health status, presence of quarantine and invasive pests, residual quantities of pesticides, etc. The Bulgarian consumer has no grounds whatsoever to worry. The barrier against breaches of phytosanitary requirements is a reliable tool for risk management, for stopping any deviation from the strict requirements of the EU!

On the other hand, it should be recalled that Turkey is a very large producer of vegetable crops (and fruit, of course). A substantial part of this production is exported to Russia and the EU – to large markets, to markets with high ceilings, to sensitive markets with enormous requirements regarding this delicate and perishable

commodity. And in Turkey, regardless of the fact that it is not a member of the EU, strict rules on the use of plant protection products are in force. The quality of Turkish vegetables is beyond doubt!

Our farmers and agribusinessmen claim with a high degree of certainty that in Turkey plant protection products are many times cheaper than the pesticides that are offered and sold legally on the Bulgarian market. Such a claim is far from the truth! Multinational companies in the agrochemical industry sell their products at approximately the same prices on the various regional markets around the world. If there are deviations, they are negligibly small. The aim of this policy is to prevent speculation and illegal export.

There is a limit beyond which incompetence becomes intolerable, even for a society like ours. The point is that when a plant protection product appears on the “black” market in our country at a price 2–3 times lower than the same product distributed legally in Bulgaria, this is a sure indication of fraud, of illegal manufacture with no trace of origin, content and quality. In other words: beware, you are being offered a pure counterfeit!

The concerned lamenters over the unenviable fate of Bulgarian vegetable growers overdo it in their desire loudly to announce to the public that domestic vegetable producers are being crushed from all sides. On the one hand – they are forced to buy expensive and excessively expensive plant protection products. On the other hand – cheap Turkish (as well as Greek and North Macedonian) vegetables, imported into our country sometimes with customs duties paid, sometimes without, torpedo the market, ruin every attempt of Bulgarian produce to break through...

And in this banally popular thesis there is a clear indication of a high degree of incorrectness, a tendency to replace the real reality with myths and legends. Because in Bulgarian vegetable production there is a paradoxical anachronism and imbalance. Regardless of the fact that in recent years this important sub-sector has been targeted with very substantial financial resources for support under various programmes and strategic directions, production is constantly decreasing, and the trend, to our greatest regret, has stable parameters. This local phenomenon of ours (to keep pouring into bottomless barrels) calls for an in-depth study, which the political class and the administrative institution – the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry – cannot or do not want, or both, to initiate! Anyone at least superficially familiar with the problematic existence of our vegetable production is aware that this is not idle talk under the rosehip bush, but the living reality. A policy based solely on the act of spending some money is self-serving and does not work!

Turkey in any case bears no blame whatsoever for the fact that Bulgarian vegetable production is expensive, unprofitable, low-yielding and non-competitive...