



ACA-Europe symposium

Disputes concerning acts by regulatory authorities

Regulatory authorities have gradually emerged as one of the new forms of State intervention. In addition to the Regal State or the State as a supplier of goods and services, the regulatory authorities, in the broad sense, cover a wide range of administrative activities: they may be authorities responsible, in a given sector or across the board, for correcting market imbalances in a context of opening up markets to competition, or for ensuring that free competition is reconciled with other general interest objectives; in the broadest sense, regulatory activities may refer to any administrative activity that seeks to reconcile interests that may be contradictory or to organise access to scarce resources in a manner consistent with general interest objectives. In this broadest sense, this notion can refer as much to the transversal authorities responsible for enforcing competition law (e.g. the French Competition Authority) as to sectoral authorities (electronic communications, transport, energy, etc.), including national data protection authorities or authorities responsible for the marketing or evaluation of health products.

The symposium planned for December 2021 should be an opportunity to examine the specific issues that disputes concerning acts taken by these regulatory authorities may raise in the administrative courts. These questions arise from certain characteristics of the acts of these authorities, characteristics over which they do not have a monopoly compared with other forms of administration, but which combine or take on a particular role. These characteristics are at least three in number: firstly, the use of a wide range of acts or intervention tools, from flexible laws and codes of conduct to more traditional regulatory acts or sanctions, via a variety of communication media (press releases, public statements, FAQs, etc.); secondly, the degree of expertise and technicality of the decisions taken in a given activity sector (energy, health, electronic communications, etc.) and/or a certain technological context (personal data protection, cyberspace, etc.); finally, integration into complex economic and social ecosystems, often with a significant European or even international dimension, and likely to have a high media profile.

In this context, from the particular object of study that is disputes concerning the acts of these regulatory authorities, the symposium planned for December 2021 will make it possible to address the important challenges that these appeals raise for the effectiveness and credibility of the court's intervention.

Courts with competence to hear disputes concerning regulatory authorities

1. Does your supreme administrative court have competence to hear appeals against acts by regulatory authorities? Yes/no

If yes:

Without being exhaustive, could you present the main regulatory authorities in your country whose acts are brought before your supreme administrative court, specifying if these appeals are subject to several levels of jurisdiction? Please distinguish, if necessary, according to the nature of the acts concerned (in the event, for example, that individual acts taken by these authorities are subject to separate jurisdictions from their general acts, notably regulations).



The regulatory bodies in Bulgaria are established by law on the grounds of art. 84 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. The main regulatory bodies are the Bulgarian National Bank, the Financial Supervision Commission, the Communications Regulation Commission, the Commission for Protection of Competition, the Energy and Water Regulatory Commission, the Electronic Media Council, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. All regulatory bodies issue their acts on the basis of the Administrative Procedure Code and special substantive administrative laws. The acts of the regulatory bodies, with the exception of the acts of the Bulgarian National Bank, are subject to judicial review for legality before the administrative court. The first instance in these cases are the administrative courts. The Supreme Administrative Court acts only as a court of cassation.

2. In particular, can any of these authorities themselves impose sanctions (including fines)? Yes/no

If yes:

is it possible to challenge them before your supreme administrative court?

The acts of the regulatory bodies imposing administrative penalties are subject to appeal under the general procedure. Only cassation appeals against the first instance court decisions rendered in cases against the acts of the regulatory bodies may be filed before the Supreme Administrative Court.

3. Are any of these regulatory authorities subject to judicial review by civil courts, for some or all of their acts? Yes/no

If yes:

Please give examples.

No, all acts which the nature of administrative acts are appealed to the administrative court. In cases where an administrative penalty, fine or financial sanction is imposed, the acts are appealed to the district court, which is part of the general courts in Bulgaria. In this type of case, the cassation instance is the administrative courts, where they hear the case in a panel of three judges.

4. Are the courts with competence to hear the acts of regulatory authorities:

- specifically identified by the texts in force, by way of derogation from the normal rules of territorial or material competence? Yes/no

- or do they result from the application of the general rules on the distribution of competences? Yes/no

Is there any specific distinction in relation to the rules of competence applicable to equivalent acts of other administrative authorities in your country? Yes/no

If yes:

Please explain.

The general rules on generic jurisdiction, which apply to all administrative cases, apply to cases. The rules of Art. 132 of the APC. The rules of the APC for local jurisdiction of the administrative courts are also applied. For some of the regulators, such as the Commission for Protection of Competition, special rules for local jurisdiction of cases apply and they are for the Administrative Court - Sofia region, regardless of the address or seat of the applicants.

5. Are the remedies available against the acts of these authorities of the same nature as those available against the equivalent or similar acts of other administrative authorities? Yes/no

If no:

Please explain.

Against the administrative acts of the regulatory bodies the means of protection are those which are provided in the APC and refer to all administrative acts.

Admissibility of appeals against regulatory acts

6. In your view, do disputes concerning “hard law” acts (regulatory acts, sanctions, individual authorisation decisions, etc.) of these authorities raise particular issues of admissibility? Yes/no

If yes:

Please explain.

The requirements for the admissibility of appeals against acts of regulatory authorities are the same as those applicable to all types of administrative acts. There are no special eligibility requirements.

7. Are “soft law” acts (opinions, recommendations, warnings, position papers) of these authorities and, more broadly, their various positions on the behaviour to be adopted by the actors in their field of intervention (whatever form they take: code of conduct, guidelines, etc.) liable to be the subject of a direct action for annulment? Yes/no

If yes: under what conditions? Make any distinction you think useful according to the degree of normativeness of the acts.

Acts that belong to soft law do not in principle have the character of administrative acts and are not subject to review for legality before the court. In case they affect specific rights and obligations of a legal entity, such an act will have the character of an administrative act and may be appealed to the court for legality under the APC.

8. Can positions taken by these authorities, possibly with little or no formality (press release, website section, FAQ, etc.) be challenged in court? Yes/no

no, such acts are not subject to appeal to the court

9. Who can challenge the acts of regulatory authorities? Specify the criteria for assessing the interest in bringing proceedings, making any useful distinction according to the type of act (soft law act; individual decisions of a non-repressive nature; sanction; etc.).

The right to appeal before the court have the persons who have a legal interest, these are the persons who are the addressees of the acts and for whom the acts are unfavorable. Those legal entities for which the act creates obligations or directly affects their legal sphere also have the right to challenge before the court.

10. Please indicate any other particularities that you consider relevant to the admissibility of appeals against the acts of these authorities (interest in bringing proceedings, time limits for appeal, specific means of appeal open to State authorities, etc.).

The deadlines for appealing against the acts are common to all legal entities. The acts of the regulatory bodies shall be appealed within 14 days from the announcement of the administrative act. No special means are provided for certain categories of legal entities, identifiable on a given basis.

Public authorities which are parties to similar proceedings shall not enjoy special remedies other than those of other parties.

11. Can the general acts of a regulatory authority, whether “hard law” or “soft law”, be challenged by way of exception in an appeal against an individual decision (sanction, follow-up to a complaint, etc.) taken by that same authority and applying that general act (for example, if a sanction imposed on an economic operator refers to previously issued guidelines or recommendations to set out the applicable legal rules and the authority’s interpretation of the texts in force)? Yes/no

If yes, to what extent? Will the plea of illegality against this general act, if upheld, lead to the (retroactive) annulment of this act?

Administrative acts that have the character of general administrative acts may be appealed under the procedure for appeal of general administrative acts. The APC contains an explicit regulation of the administrative acts, which are general, refer to an indefinite or unlimited number of legal entities and have a single action. The APC regulates both the manner of their issuance and the manner of their appeal. This procedure of appeal shall apply in cases where some acts of the regulatory bodies have the character of general administrative acts.

12. Where the actions of these authorities have harmful consequences, should liability claims be brought:

- against these authorities? Yes/no

- or against the State on whose behalf they may have acted? Yes/no

Yes, when the acts of this type of body are illegal and have harmful consequences, after their annulment the injured parties can file claims for damages. The Law on the Liability of the State and Municipalities for Damages finds application.

Internal organisation of the courts and hearing of appeals

13. Are cases concerning these authorities assigned, within the courts and more particularly within the supreme administrative court, to panels specifically dedicated (to the authority concerned, or more generally to regulatory litigation), in order to allow for an increase in the level of competence or a critical mass of cases? Yes/no

If yes: please explain and give examples.

- Or is it a distributed dispute with no particular allocation rule? Yes/no

Please indicate, in a more general way, any notable particularities in the internal organisation of your courts that may be relevant.

The work of judges in the Supreme Administrative Court is organized in such a way that all judges are divided into 8 divisions. Each of the departments has a specialization in matter and considers certain material administrative laws. Through this organization, cases of appeals against acts of regulatory bodies are dealt with only by some of the individual divisions. There is a specialization in the matter, which allows to achieve a deeper understanding of the issues of specific cases and to summarize the case law on this type of cases.

14. What investigative or examination techniques can you use in particular in the examination of particularly technical cases:

- oral inquiry hearing in the presence of the parties,
- expert's report,
- amicus curiae,
- solicitation of a reference expert administration,
- other?

Please explain, where applicable by giving some examples from your experience.

Do you feel that these regulatory cases require a particular method? Yes/no

If yes:

Please explain.

In such cases, the most commonly used procedural means is an expert opinion. However, this procedural remedy is applied only before the first instance administrative court. Only written evidence is admissible before a cassation instance such as the Supreme Administrative Court. before the first court instance, apart from an expert opinion, all other evidence under the APC is available. It is important to point out that the court may also appoint an expert examination ex officio when it finds that it is necessary to resolve the case.

15. What is the role of the traditional administrations (especially when the act of an independent administrative authority, distinct from the ministry concerned, is at issue) in the examination of appeals against regulatory authorities:

- are they invited to comment? Yes/no
- or do they remain outside the case? Yes/no

No. In cases where an individual administrative act of a regulatory body is appealed, only it and the complainant and the parties affected by the act are involved in the case. In cases where the act affects the rights and interests of an agency to which the regulatory body is affiliated, that body may also be a constituted party. The court assesses the need to constitute other parties in each case according to the specific circumstances of the case.

16. More generally, when examining appeals against acts with a high socio-economic impact issued by these authorities, in particular those in charge of a field of economic regulation, does the court collect (on the initiative of the court or the interested organisations) observations from other stakeholders? Yes/no

If yes:

Please explain.

In this case the rule is the same, the court assesses which parties, apart from the issuer of the act and its addressee, are affected by the administrative act and in this case constitutes them as interested parties in the process.

17. What role does orality play, even before the hearing, in the investigation of complex cases, in particular those involving regulatory acts?

The same procedural rules apply to this type of case as apply to other administrative cases. Oral speech is admissible on a general basis, but in practice its role is smaller than the role of written documents and arguments set out in writing.

18. Do you have, in one form or another (specialisation of magistrates, continuing education, expert decision support unit to assist magistrates, etc.) internal resources in your courts enabling you, if necessary, to familiarise yourself with or master sectoral but also transversal expert subjects (technologies protecting privacy, communication technologies in the case of audiovisual or electronic communications regulators, role and architecture of social networks, etc.)? Yes/no

If yes:

Please explain and give examples.

When there is a law enforcement problem related to a new legal framework, the adoption of a new law and EU regulation, judges make a proposal to the President of the Division or to the President of the Court, then seminars, meetings with leading experts on a given area are organized. topic or summary of the case law and the contradictions in it.

The extent of the judge's control, the court decision

19. What are the main categories of grounds that can be invoked and relied upon against the acts of regulatory authorities? Based on your experience and the case law of your country, do you find that appeals against acts of independent authorities raise particular problems (real independence in decision-making, impartiality, etc.) compared with disputes concerning acts taken by other administrative authorities? Please share any relevant analysis you may have

The grounds for appealing against the administrative acts of the regulatory bodies are the same as for the other administrative acts. These are the presence of competence - material, time, compliance with the requirement for form and reasons of the decision, compliance with the administrative procedural rules that are applicable to each body, compliance with substantive laws and compliance with the purpose of the law.

20. Does your court consider itself bound by the technical or economic assessments made by the regulator? Or does it feel entitled to control them? In the latter case, is this control complete or only limited to the manifest error of assessment?)

The court has the power to exercise full control over the work of the administrative regulatory bodies, and may control both the factual findings made in the framework of the administrative proceedings and the legal conclusions made by the body.

21. If you receive an application against an act of a regulatory authority or against a sanction imposed by it, is your court only competent to annul the act or sanction or can it also modify the sanction imposed?

The court has jurisdiction both to repeal the sanction in its entirety and to amend it by reducing it. The court cannot increase the sanction.

22. Have you been confronted with the problem of an independent authority in your country taking into account a foreign element such as an opinion given by an authority in another country or a decision by a European authority (for example, in the context of the mechanisms set up by the GDPR between the European data protection authorities, which lead these authorities to submit some of their decisions to the European Data Protection Committee for approval)? Yes/no

If yes: what kind of legal treatment? Please explain and give examples.

23. Are these cases a particular field of preliminary questions to the Court of Justice of the European Union? Yes/no

If yes:

Please explain and give examples.

Yes, in these cases preliminary questions have been addressed by the order of art. 267 TFEU to CJUE

24. Does the drafting of court decisions raise particular issues related to the technical nature or media exposure of some of these cases? Yes/no

If yes:

Please explain and give examples.

No=

The judge in the regulatory ecosystem

25. Are judgments on such appeals subject to any particular publicity or accompanying measures (press release)? Yes/no

If yes:

Please specify.

No.

26. Are regulatory authorities entitled to challenge acts or decisions taken by other public persons on the grounds that they impinge on their competence?

No.

27. Independently of a particular case, do your court or its members regularly participate in general exchanges bringing together professionals (regulatory authorities, operators, doctrine, ministries, etc.) from the regulatory sectors concerned? Yes/no

If yes:

Please specify.

No.

28. Are the judges in your courts, or more generally the staff of your investigating and registry departments, sometimes led in their careers to take up activities in regulatory authorities, and are such careers encouraged where appropriate? Yes/no

If yes:

Please explain.

There are no such cases

Quantitative data

29. What is the number of cases concerning regulatory authorities registered before your supreme administrative court in 2020?

There are no special statistics on this issue

30. What is the number of cases concerning regulatory authorities settled by your supreme administrative court in 2020?

There are no special statistics on this issue

31. What is your estimate of the percentage of cases concerning regulatory authorities in the total number of cases registered before your supreme administrative court in 2020?

32. What is your estimate of the percentage of cases concerning regulatory authorities in the total number of cases settled by your supreme administrative court in 2020?

33. What percentage of applications against the acts of regulatory authorities were annulled, in whole or in part, by your supreme administrative court in 2020?

There are no special statistics on this issue