

# 12 arrested in France in latest hit against tobacco smugglers

Earlier this week, the French Gendarmerie (Gendarmerie Nationale) with the support of the French Judicial Customs (SEJF) arrested 5 individuals and seized 250 000 counterfeit cigarettes in a series of raids in the city of Nantes.

This action follows an earlier one on 9 April which saw 7 other members of the same organised crime group arrested in the cities of Nantes, Rodez and Montpellier. On this occasion, close to 5 tonnes of counterfeit cigarettes were seized, alongside €37 000 in cash.

Europol deployed specialists from its [European Financial Economic Crime Centre](#) (EFECC) on both these actions days to support the French authorities.

This organised crime group received the illegal cigarettes from two criminal networks based abroad, arranged for their storage in various cities in France and then managed their subsequent distribution through a number of criminal wholesalers – composed mostly of Georgian, Armenian and Ukrainian nationals – onto the French black market.

The same organised crime group was also involved in the management of payments and the corresponding financial flows. This criminal group has now been fully dismantled.

Since the start of the investigation, the French investigators collected evidence that over 75 tonnes of counterfeit cigarettes were imported and distributed throughout France for a loss to the French budget estimated close to €22 million.

## **Europol support**

Europol's Analysis Project (AP) Smoke as part of the EFECC has supported this investigation from the onset and organised coordination meetings with the national investigators involved to discuss procedural requirements and identify a clear way forward.

Its experts there after organised the intensive exchange of information needed to prepare for the action days in France.

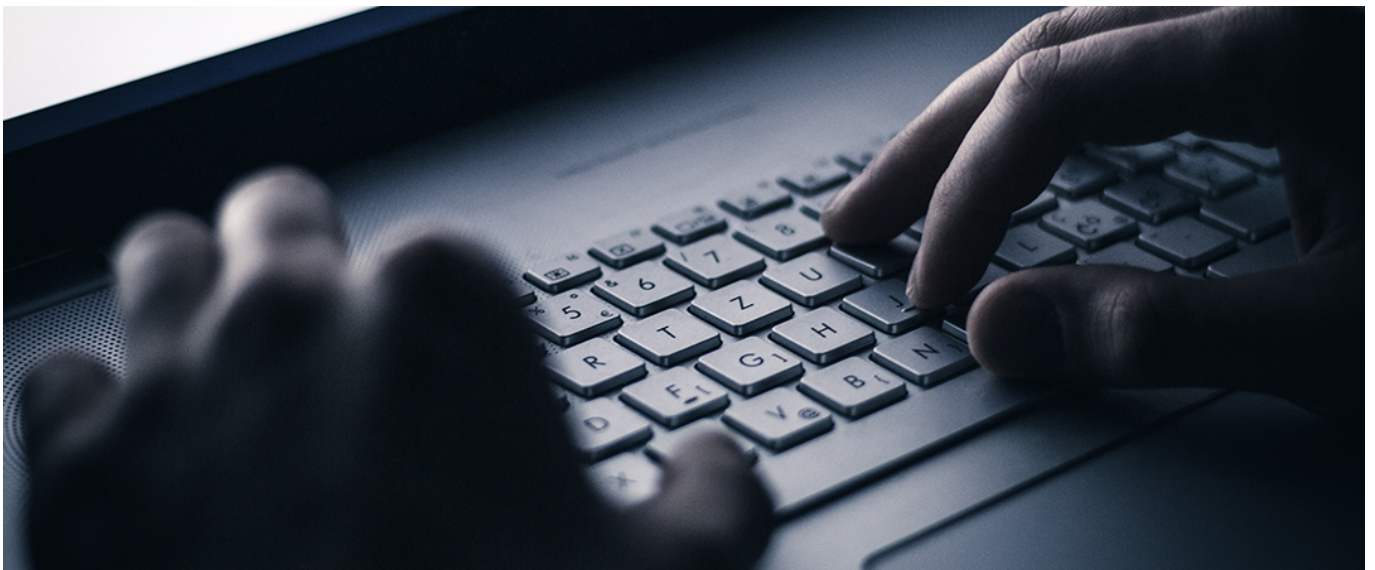
This investigation was carried out in the framework of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats.



In 2010 the European Union set up a [four-year Policy Cycle](#) to ensure greater continuity in the fight against serious international and organised crime. In 2017 the Council of the EU decided to continue the EU Policy Cycle for the 2018 – 2021 period. It aims to tackle the most significant threats posed by organised and serious international crime to the EU. This is achieved by improving and strengthening cooperation between the relevant services of EU Member States, institutions and agencies, as well as non-EU countries and organisations, including the private sector where relevant. [Excise fraud](#) is one of the priorities for the Policy Cycle.

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## [Trading scheme resulting in €30 million in losses uncovered](#)



The German authorities initiated the investigation into this large-scale online investment fraud network with hundreds of victims across Europe

On 11 May 2021, a large criminal network involved in investment fraud and money laundering was dismantled as a result of a cross border operation supported by Europol and [Eurojust](#). The investigation, led by Germany, involved law enforcement and judicial authorities from Bulgaria, Israel, Latvia, North-Macedonia, Poland, Spain and Sweden.

## **Final results of the investigation:**

- 11 arrested (5 in Bulgaria and 1 in Israel on the action day and 5 previously in Spain)
- A dozen of locations were searched in Bulgaria, Israel, Poland, North Macedonia and Sweden
- Seizures include numerous electronic devices, real estate, jewellery, high-end vehicles and approximately €2 million in cash
- Bank accounts have also been frozen

## **At least €7 million in losses in Germany alone**

The criminal network created different trading online platforms advertising substantial profits from investments in high-risk options and cryptocurrencies. The criminal group ran at least four of such professionally looking trading platforms, luring victims through advertisements in social media and search engines. The members of the criminal group were posing as experienced brokers when contacting the victims via the call centre they had set-up. The suspects were using manipulated software to show the gains from the investments and to motivate the victims to invest even more.

The fraud scheme, organised mainly by Israeli nationals, included call centres, ran from Bulgaria and North-Macedonia. In total, the criminal network defrauded victims across Europe of an estimated €30 million. Victims from Germany alone suffered at least €7 million in losses while 300 complains were filed in Spain. The suspects laundered the illegal profits through bank accounts controlled or owned by shell companies based in different EU countries.

Europol supported the operation by facilitating information exchange and providing analytical support and operational coordination. During the action day, Europol experts cross-checked operational information in real-time against Europol's databases to provide leads to investigators in the field.

Headquartered in The Hague, the Netherlands, we support the 27 EU Member States in their fight against terrorism, cybercrime and other serious and organised forms of crime. We also work with many non-EU partner states and international organisations. From its various threat assessments to its intelligence-gathering and operational activities, Europol has the tools and resources it needs to do its part in making Europe safer.

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**[ECDC Director discusses agency's mandate on "European Health Union](#)**

## Now!” podcast



A strengthened mandate for ECDC is included in the European Health Union legislative package proposed by the European Commission, and is currently under negotiation in the European Council and the European Parliament.

What would a new mandate for ECDC involve in the context of pandemic surveillance, preparedness, and response? How could a strengthened ECDC mandate better protect Europeans and support Member States? And how does this proposal fit into a larger framework with a more ambitious vision of working closely together in solidarity on future health threats in Europe?

In the podcast, Andrea Ammon also shares some of the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and discusses the need for after-action reviews and close collaboration across borders. She highlights the urgency of additional investment in public health and a new generation of dedicated public health professionals. Finally, she finally reflects on the importance of establishing trust, creating a dialogue through community engagement, and the role ECDC has played in addressing the so-called “infodemic”.

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## **Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Myanmar/Burma**



On 22 March 2021 the Council adopted Decision (CFSP) 2021/639<sup>1</sup> concerning restrictive measures against Myanmar/Burma.

The Council added ten persons and two entities in the list of natural and legal persons, entities and bodies subject to restrictive measures in the Annex to Decision 2013/184/CFSP

The Candidate Countries the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania<sup>2</sup>, the country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidate Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the EFTA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova align themselves with this Council Decision.

They will ensure that their national policies conform to this Council Decision.

The European Union takes note of this commitment and welcomes it.

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<sup>1</sup> Published on 19.04.2021 in the Official Journal of the European Union no. L132I, p. 12

<sup>2</sup> The Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

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## [Spanish and UK police forces recover €6 million in two-year long Ponzi scheme investigation](#)



Hundreds of victims of a €15 million Ponzi scheme may soon recover up to 40% of their losses as a result of an international law enforcement effort to recover the ill-gotten funds.

The cooperation between the Spanish regional Catalan Police (Mossos d'Esquadra) and the UK West Yorkshire Police, facilitated by Europol, has made it possible for the Spanish authorities to recover over €6 million in the framework of an investigation into a Ponzi scheme exceeding €15 million with over 200 victims.

An investigation was launched at the beginning of March 2019 after a complaint was filed in Gerona, Spain, after the main suspect disappeared. Several other complaints soon followed, describing a pyramid fraud committed by the missing suspect, a Spanish national residing in the UK who duped his victims into investing in seemingly secure investments with high returns.

## **Returning stolen funds**

Timely investigative support is vital in asset recovery cases that cross multiple borders in order to locate, freeze, confiscate and finally repatriate stolen assets.

Europol's [European Financial and Economic Crime Centre](#) (EFECC) supported the case from the onset and brought together the Spanish and British investigators at its headquarters to discuss procedural requirements and identify a clear way forward. Its asset recovery experts there after organised the intensive exchange of information needed to prepare for the confiscation of the ill-gotten assets.

The asset recovery approach which was in this case a major angle of the investigation clearly paid off: over £642 000 was held in UK bank accounts from the outset and frozen to ensure it was secured for confiscation. The British investigators were also able to successfully trace back a consequent amount of the diverted funds which had been invested in online gambling companies, a luxury vehicle, jewellery and IT equipment.

After two years of intense cooperation, the West Yorkshire Police transferred at the end of April 2021 more than €6 million to the Spanish judicial authorities to be used, if the judicial process so decides, to compensate the victims. The main suspect has been in custody since 2019 by order of the Court of Gerona.

Confiscation is a strategic priority in the EU's fight against organised crime. The recovery of proceeds from crime deprives criminals of what they have strived to acquire and strengthens the notion that "crime should not pay". The faster the tracing of assets derived from crime is, the more effective the confiscation and recovery of criminal profits can be. Europol's EFECC helps investigators across Europe in identifying assets that have been illegally acquired on their territories and facilitates the exchanges of relevant information at European level.