

# Europol helps Belgian and Swiss authorities unravel Vitae Ponzi scheme

With the support of Europol, the Belgian Federal Judicial Police (Federale Gerechtelijke Politie, Police Judiciaire Fédérale) under the jurisdiction of the Belgian Federal Prosecutor's Office (Federaal Parket, Parquet Fédéral) has taken action against the alleged members of an organised crime group running a worldwide Ponzi scheme.

This criminal syndicate was using the social media platform 'Vitae.co' and website 'Vitaetoken.io' to trick people into investing into a Ponzi scheme. It is believed that some 223 000 individuals from 177 countries have fallen victim to this investment scam.

On 22 June, house searches were carried out in 17 different locations in Belgium, mainly in Antwerp, West Flanders and Limburg. A total of five individuals were detained for their alleged involvement in this fraud scheme.

The members of this organised crime group are for the most part Belgian nationals who were making use of a company under Swiss jurisdiction. A number of house searches were carried out in parallel by the Swiss Federal Police (fedpol).

A total of €1,1 million in cash was seized, alongside €1,5 million worth in cryptocurrencies and 17 luxury vehicles.

Europol deployed four of its experts to Belgium and Switzerland to assist the national authorities with the actions in the field.

The website and social media platform have now been rendered inaccessible.

This operation was carried out in the framework of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT).



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. Criminal finances is one of the priorities for the Policy Cycle.

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## [Survey: Help shape the future of ESCAIDE](#)



ECDC has appointed the independent consulting firm [BDO LLP](#) to deliver this evaluation, which will include a short survey on several aspects of ESCAIDE.

We would be interested to hear your opinion and would like to invite you to answer the survey questions via the following link:

<https://response.questback.com/bdo/ESCAIDEevaluation>

The survey should take 5-10 minutes to complete.

This is an anonymous survey and the results will be reported in summary form only – we therefore encourage you to be as frank and open as possible.

We invite your responses no later than **Friday 9 July 2021** at 23:59 Central European Time.

Thank you for your time and interest in shaping the future of ESCAIDE.

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# EU imposes sanctions on Belarusian economy



The Council today introduced **new restrictive measures against the Belarusian regime** to respond to the escalation of serious human rights violations in Belarus and the violent repression of civil society, democratic opposition and journalists, as well as to the forced landing of a Ryanair flight in Minsk on 23 May 2021 and the related detention of journalist Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega.

The **new targeted economic sanctions** include the prohibition to directly or indirectly sell, supply, transfer or export to anyone in Belarus equipment, technology or software intended primarily for use in the monitoring or **interception of the internet and of telephone communications**, and **dual-use goods and technologies** for military use and to specified persons, entities or bodies in Belarus. Trade in **petroleum products, potassium chloride** ('potash'), and goods used for the production or manufacturing of **tobacco products** is restricted. Furthermore, **access to EU capital markets** is restricted, and **providing insurance and re-insurance** to the Belarusian government and Belarusian public bodies and agencies is prohibited. Lastly, the **European Investment Bank** will stop any disbursement or payment under any existing agreements in relation to projects in the public sector, and any existing Technical Assistance Service Contracts. Member states will also be required to take actions to limit the involvement in Belarus of **multilateral development banks** of which they are members.

Today's decision fully implements the European Council conclusions of 24 and 25 May 2021, in which EU heads of state and government called on the Council to ban overflight of EU airspace by Belarusian airlines and prevent access to EU airports of flights operated by such airlines, and to adopt the necessary measures, including additional listings of persons and entities on the basis of the relevant sanctions framework, and to adopt further targeted economic sanctions. All of these measures have now been put in place.

Since October 2020, the EU has progressively imposed restrictive measures against Belarus. The measures have been adopted in response to the fraudulent nature of the August 2020 presidential elections in the country, and the intimidation and violent repression of peaceful protesters, opposition members and journalists. A total of **166 persons and 15 entities** are currently subject to restrictive measures, which comprise an asset freeze applicable to both individuals and entities, and travel ban on individuals.

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# Latin Americans lodge far fewer applications for asylum in the EU+

Asylum applications from six main origin countries in Latin America have fallen strongly since August 2020, possibly because of fewer flight connections to the EU+ and increased movements towards the United States.

Analysis [released](#) by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) on asylum trends in April 2021 shows that **about 36 800 applications for international protection were lodged in the EU+ in April 2021.**<sup>1</sup> This was significantly fewer than in March (- 8 %) and the lowest level since last summer.

Apart from Syrians lodging fewer applications in April, the largest declines occurred for Venezuelans and Colombians. This reinforced a persistent downward trend of applications by Latin Americans. **From 9 000 in August 2020, total applications by nationals of Venezuela, Colombia, Honduras, Peru, El Salvador and Nicaragua have steadily fallen to 2 100 in April, for unclear reasons.** The decline also contrasts with developments at the southwest border of the United States.<sup>2</sup> One factor may be that travel links to the EU+ have remained scarce. This may have prompted a redirection of migration towards the United States, possibly supported by expectations of changing U.S. policies.



## **Venezuela and Colombia no longer among the main origin countries**

**The top origin countries in April were Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Nigeria.** For the first time since early 2018 (except April/May 2020), neither Venezuela nor Colombia was among the 10 main origin countries. In contrast, Malians (950) lodged the most applications since late 2017 and joined the 10 main origin countries for the first time in seven years. Moroccans (910) remained among the main applicant nationalities. **The high levels of applications not only by Malians and Moroccans but also by Senegalese and Gambians might partially reflect irregular migration on the Western African route to the Canary Islands.** Applications by Belarusians (220) were close to peak values in previous months.

**More applications (1 500) were lodged by self-claimed unaccompanied minors in the EU+ in April 2021.** They represented 4 % of the total applications in April, compared to 3 % so far this year. The increase primarily reflects more applications by unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan, who are by far the largest group.

## Decisions issued by EU+ asylum authorities remain high

EU+ asylum authorities issued 50 000 first instance decisions in April, down from the peak in March but more than in previous months. As in March, about one in four first instance decisions concerned a repeated application, most of which had been lodged by Syrians. **First instance decisions in April continued to far exceed applications.**

The high level of decisions resulted in a slight fall of pending cases: some 364 100 cases were pending at first instance at the end of April, down by 6 % from the end of March. **The recognition rate<sup>3</sup> in the EU+ was 27 % in April 2021.** Recognition rates were especially high for Eritreans (77 %) and Yemenis (74 %) but unusually low for Syrians (39 %) due to low recognition of their repeated applications.

For more information and an interactive data visualisation, please visit the [Latest Asylum Trends](#) page.

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**Any further information may be obtained from the European Asylum Support Office on the following email address: [press@easo.europa.eu](mailto:press@easo.europa.eu)**

[1] EASO EPS data are preliminary and might differ from validated official statistics submitted to Eurostat at a later stage. Eurostat data are used in the annual EASO Asylum Report. The total EPS numbers exclude missing data for one EU+ country.

[2] See the figures published by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, [Southwest Land Border Encounters](#), 9 June 2021.

[3] This refers to the recognition rate for EU-regulated types of protection (refugee status and subsidiary protection) at first instance.

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## [A new CoR study sounds the alarm about the lack of involvement of regions and cities in national recovery plans](#)



According to the study, which analyses eight of the NRRPs submitted to the European Commission by the end of May, the national recovery plans foresee very limited opportunities for regions to provide democratic input. Most of the regional and local actors were only consulted in formal and unilateral ways and will mainly be tasked with the administrative delivery of investment policies. Their ideas were rarely transposed into the plans. However,



granting more political leeway over the use of investment resources to cities and regions would foster local communities' ownership over policies and boost capacity building at the local level. The lack of involvement of regional and local authorities, which are crucial to delivering investments and services as well as to implementing reforms, could undermine the impact and efficiency of NRRPs.

[Michael Murphy](#) (IE/EPP), Chair of the CoR's ECON Commission and member of Tipperary County Council, said: " *The study presented today confirms what our earlier work had suggested: there is a broad diversity of situations across the EU but many Member States treat consultations with regional and local actors not as meaningful exchanges, but rather as unilateral processes – as 'box-ticking' exercises. Regions' and towns' wealth of knowledge and experience rarely make it into the recovery plans, which is a missed opportunity and simply does not constitute good governance. Local and regional authorities are crucial to delivering investments and public services, as well as implementing reforms, and it is a mistake to attempt to build the EU's recovery without them.* "

ECON members expressed their regret that the investments proposed in the NRRPs don't consider potential synergies between the Recovery and Resilience facility (RRF) and EU cohesion policy funds. Overlaps between the two financial instruments could undermine cohesion policy's effectiveness. Other than Italy and Belgium, there is no territorial allocation of resources. The study also comes to the conclusion that the role which NRRPs intend for local and regional authorities in driving forward the green and digital transitions remains vague and ill-defined.

In light of the study's results, the ECON members urged the European Commission to carry out a thorough assessment of all NRRPs, to insist – jointly with the European Parliament – on the definition of local and regional authorities' role in the remaining phases of the NRRPs, to maintain cohesion as a fundamental value and to involve EU regions and cities in the European Semester and in the monitoring and evaluation of the plans.

Besides the debate about the EU's Recovery Fund, the ECON commission adopted the draft opinion " [Protecting Industrial and Craft Geographical Indications \(ICGIs\) in the European Union](#) " which calls for a harmonised EU regulatory framework for ICGIs to replace the patchwork of national legal instruments and thereby safeguard an important part of Europe's cultural heritage, improve consumer rights, increase producers' incomes and contribute to the development of the regions concerned.

[Martine Pinville](#) (FR/PES), member of the Regional Council of Nouvelle-Aquitaine and rapporteur for the opinion, said: " *The CoR's long-standing demand for a regulation to protect industrial and craft geographical indications must now be put into practice. For consumers, such a regulation would be a guarantee of the origin, quality and authenticity of a product. For craftsmen or companies, it would mean an appreciation of their know-how and protect them against unfair competition and counterfeiting. Finally, for the regions, it's about protecting a local heritage and maintaining value added and non-relocatable jobs in their territory .* "

The opinion is scheduled to be adopted by the CoR's plenary during its October session.

The ECON commission meeting also provided an opportunity for members to exchange views on working documents for "Updating the 2020 Industrial Strategy: towards a stronger Single Market for Europe's recovery", presented by rapporteur [Jeannette Baljeu](#) (NL/Renew Europe), and for the opinion on better regulation, presented by the rapporteur of the CIVEX commission [Piero Mauro Zanin](#) (IT/EPP).

In addition, the ECON commission appointed [Rob Jonkman](#) (ECR/NL), as a rapporteur on the opinion "The implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility", and recommended [Mark Weinmeister](#) (EPP/DE), to be appointed as rapporteur general on the "European Digital Identity".

### **Background:**

The EU's [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) (RRF) is the EUR 672.5 billion fiscal instrument (EUR 312.5 billion in grants and EUR 360 billion in loans) designed to support Member States in carrying out reforms and investing in the EU's common priorities. The RRF is the biggest financial tool included in the EUR 750 billion recovery instrument [Next Generation EU](#). To benefit from the RRF's support, Member States should present national recovery and resilience plans indicating the reforms and investments that would be financed. Up to now, the European Commission has [received 24 national plans](#) out of 27, of which it has endorsed 11.

The study on "Regional and Local Authorities in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans", commissioned by the CoR, focuses on eight of the NRRPs submitted to the EU by the end of May 2021: Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania and Spain. The full study is available [here](#).

A [CoR-CEMR joint consultation](#) presented in January already pointed out that many EU governments were excluding regions and cities from the preparation of post-COVID recovery plans. The full results are available [here](#).

According to the [RRF Regulation](#) (art. 18.4.q), and as recently recalled in a [European Parliament resolution](#) adopted by a large majority, the recovery and resilience plans should be prepared and, "where available", implemented after a "consultation process, conducted in accordance with the national legal framework of local and regional authorities, social partners, civil society organisations, youth organisations and other relevant stakeholders". Member States will have to submit a summary of the consultation process, which has to detail "how the input of the stakeholders is reflected in the recovery and resilience plans".

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