

# Nine arrests in hit against network smuggling migrants via the Greek-Turkish land border

The network used violence against the migrants who paid up to €2500 for the illegal journey

On 20 January 2021, the Hellenic Police (Ελληνική Αστυνομία), supported by Europol, dismantled an organised crime group smuggling migrants from Turkey to Greece by land. After passing the border crossing, the migrants were forced to walk in groups of 3 to 10 people for several days until they reached a predefined location. From there, members of the smuggling network would pick them up by car to bring them to a safe house in Northern Greece. Afterwards, the migrants were transported to Thessaloniki and from there on to Athens, using sophisticated methods to avoid police detection. The investigation identified that the network, active since December 2019, owned over 130 vehicles, most of them purchased with fake documents. Over 10 cars were often registered under the same owner.

Relatives of the migrants were paying between €900 and €2500 per person for the smuggling services, transferring the payments via the hawala network. Members of the criminal group were using violence against the migrants to ensure the payments. A high ranked member of the group is believed to be in Turkey.

## **Results:**

- 9 suspects arrested (5 in Thessaloniki, 2 in Katerini, 2 in Athens)
- The leader of the network is one of the 9 arrested
- 4 house searches performed
- 5 vehicles seized
- Genuine and fake documents and electronic equipment seized

Northern-Greece is an important hub for smuggling of migrants due to the reinforced border protection along the Evros River. Law enforcement authorities have identified a large number of criminal networks attempting to respond to the high demand of smuggling services in this area.

Europol provided continuous operational support, tailored analytical support and cross-checking of operational information against Europol's databases. Europol also supported the action day on the spot by the deployment of a Europol Guest Officer. This allowed for the real-time cross-checking of operational information against Europol's databases.

The operation was carried out under the umbrella of the Greek National Operational Plan signed by Europol and the Hellenic Police in June 2016. The purpose of the plan is to disrupt organised criminal networks involved in

migrant smuggling and to reinforce secondary security controls in migration hotspots.

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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.



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. [Facilitation of illegal immigration](#) is one of the priorities for the Policy Cycle.

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## [Supporting EU Member States' reporting on SDG implementation](#)

In a joint letter from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, and FRA Director, Michael O'Flaherty, FRA and the UN Human Rights Office provided relevant information and data to contribute to the reviews. FRA compiled available information from its work that can be referred to in the national reports when reporting on fundamental rights. The material was sent to Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the six EU Member States. It will also be shared with FRA's National Liaison Officers, with National Human Rights Institutions and civil society organisations – including SDG Watch national organisations – so that it can feed into the national consultation processes on SDG implementation.

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## Article – Plenary highlights: vaccines, new US president, right to disconnect



### **Covid-19 vaccines**

During a plenary debate on Tuesday, most MEPs expressed support for the EU's common approach towards vaccination. However, [they called for more solidarity](#) and transparency regarding the contracts with pharmaceutical companies.

### **EU-US relations**

On Wednesday, [MEPs discussed](#) the political situation in the US and welcomed the inauguration of the new president. This is an opportunity for the EU and US to [further strengthen relations](#) and tackle common challenges, MEPs said.

### **Alexei Navalny**

MEPs criticised the arrest of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and demanded additional EU sanctions on Russia in a [plenary debate on Tuesday](#) and a [resolution approved on Thursday](#).

## Right to disconnect

Workers should not be obliged to answer work-related calls, emails or messages outside of working hours, [MEPs said on Thursday](#). The resolution calls on the European Commission to propose legislation protecting the right to disconnect.

## Portuguese presidency

[Portugal took over the rotating Council Presidency](#) at the start of the year. [Prime Minister António Costa told MEPs on Wednesday](#) that his country's presidency will strive to make progress with the vaccination campaign against Covid-19 and with the economic and social recovery from the pandemic.

## Affordable housing

[Affordable and decent housing](#) should be a fundamental right for all, enforceable through legislation, according to a resolution adopted on Thursday. Decent homes should have access to clean and high-quality drinking water, adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities, as well as connection to sewage and water networks, [the text specifies](#).

## Fighting poverty

Parliament approved on Thursday the use of additional post Covid-19 funds for food and other basic assistance [for those most in need](#). The adapted rules for the [Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived \(FEAD\)](#) ensure that support will continue in 2021 and 2022.

## Artificial intelligence

Parliament adopted [guidelines on the military and civil use of Artificial Intelligence \(AI\)](#) on Wednesday, following the recent [adoption of proposals on the regulation of AI](#) with regard to ethics, liability and intellectual property. MEPs believe that AI should be subject to human control and that lethal autonomous weapon systems should be prohibited.

## Gender equality

MEPs called for new measures to [combat violence against women and close the gender pay gap](#), eliminate [gender-based inequalities related to the Covid-19 crisis](#), and improve the integration of women in the digital sector on Thursday.

## The EU's foreign and security policy

The EU must be able to defend its interests and values, and promote a rules-based international order that guarantees multilateralism, democracy and human rights, MEPs said in their [annual review of the EU foreign and security policy](#). In a separate report, they expressed concern that authoritarian regimes around the world [had used the Covid-19 pandemic to repress human rights](#).

## Tax havens

The EU's blacklist of tax havens is ineffective and confusing and does not live up to its full potential, MEPs said in a resolution [proposing improvements to the system](#) on Thursday.

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## [A new consultation warns: many EU governments are excluding regions and cities from the preparation of post-COVID recovery plans](#)



*□The CoR-CEMR work points out that only a few countries took on local-regional authorities' input, thereby threatening the successful implementation of the Recovery Plan for Europe.*

**The results of the joint consultation were presented during the meeting of the Commission for Economic Policy (ECON) of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR). Members of the ECON also adopted by unanimity the draft opinion on the Action Plan on Critical Raw Materials, undertaken by Isolde Ries (DE/PES), First Vice-President of the Saarland Regional Parliament.**

In order to understand the extent to which local communities are involved in the preparation of the national Recovery and Resilience plans, the CoR and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) carried out [a consultation](#) of associations of local and regional authorities. The submission of the national plans to the European Commission is mandatory if Member States want to benefit from the support of the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) (RRF), the EUR 672.5 billion instrument that is the cornerstone of the recovery instrument Next Generation EU, known also as [Recovery Plan for Europe](#).

*“The CoR and ECON pride itself on evidence-based research and these results*

*show that unfortunately 'only a minority of Member States consult their local and regional authorities in the preparation of the national Recovery and Resilience Plans and that an even smaller number actually takes on their input'. The principal barrier identified by respondents is 'a simple lack of willingness on behalf of the national government, which did not seek to involve subnational government representatives'. Going forward, what is important is that this reality is shared widely with the institutions which can further encourage the involvement of local and regional authorities in these plans before their final version is submitted", underlined [Michael Murphy](#) (IE/EPP), chair of the ECON commission and member of Tipperary County Council.*

[Christophe Rouillon](#) (FR/PES), Mayor of Coullaines and CoR's rapporteur-general on the RRF, highlighted that *"the RRF's regulation contains declarations of intent for involving cities and regions in the national recovery plans. Involving them at the planning stage would guarantee an efficient use of resources on the ground to avoid deadweight effects and redundancies, in particular for the European structural funds. The left hand needs to know what the right hand is doing. The ball is still in the Member States' court: they can and must do better in terms of transparency and coordination"*.

[Dario Nardella](#), president of Eurocities and Mayor of Florence, who joined the round table discussion, stated: *"If we act quickly we can still ensure the recovery funds find their mark to put people's lives back on track and deliver the twin digital and green priorities locally. Now that cities have been recognised as important partners in the Recovery Plan's regulation, we need national governments and local ones to work together to deliver urgent resources to the people that have been hardest hit in our cities"*.

[Dragos Pîslaru](#) (RO/Renew Europe), member of the European Parliament and co-rapporteur on the RRF, said: *"When I first started working on the Recovery and Resilience Facility, I realised that answers will be found only through dialogue with citizens. That is why I launched 13 consultations in EU Member States. An ideal national Recovery and Resilience Plan should coherently reflect all good ideas. I plead for the Member States to do the same exercise. The European Parliament made sure that the Member States will run consultations with relevant stakeholders of the civil society, as well as local and regional authorities, when drafting and implementing the recovery and resilience plans"*.

[Lucia Puttrich](#), Minister for European and Federal Affairs of the German Land of Hessen, declared *"The RRF is the largest component of the Recovery Plan. Given the amount of aid, implementation is particularly important. The focus must now be on ensuring that the money reaches the region and generates important impulses. This means investing in competitiveness, in the Green Deal, in strengthening the health system and in digitalisation. These goals can only be implemented if the regions have a say in the design and implementation of the programmes. Because having a say means co-designing very close to the needs on the ground. This is the basic idea of subsidiarity and we explicitly promote it"*.

The CoR engaged in an extensive monitoring process of the implementation of

the RRF. This activity will culminate in a Recovery and Resilience Forum, whose first edition is planned in October 2021 during the European Week of Regions and Cities.

During the meeting, members of the ECON commission also adopted by unanimity the draft opinion on the [Action Plan on Critical Raw Materials](#). Rapporteur [Isolde Ries](#) (DE/PES), First Vice-President of the Saarland Regional Parliament, said: *“Modern societies and economies cannot function in the long term without reliable, safe, competitive and environmentally friendly supply of raw materials. Critical raw materials are required in many key European industries, such as automotive, steel, aerospace, IT, health and renewable energy sectors. The dependence on critical raw materials should be reduced through a circular use of resources, sustainable products and innovations. Domestic raw material extraction and processing in the EU must be strengthened and procurement from third countries diversified”*. The draft opinion is scheduled to be voted during the CoR’s Plenary session in March.

The ECON commission appointed [Loïg Chesnais-Girard](#) (FR/PES), president of Brittany’s regional council and chair of the [CoR-UK Contact Group](#), to serve as rapporteur-general on the *Brexit Adjustment Reserve*. The European Commission has proposed a EUR 5 billion budget for [this instrument](#) intended to support business, regions and local communities worst affected by the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. The draft opinion will be voted during the Plenary session in March.

Moreover, [Ricardo Rio](#) (PT/EPP), Mayor of Braga, was pre-appointed as rapporteur of the own initiative opinion *Delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030*. The appointment is subject to the approval of the CoR’s Bureau.

#### □□Background:□

The CoR-CEMR joint consultation gathered the views and experiences of 25 organisations representative of a variety of subnational government levels across 19 EU Member States: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. The targeted consultation was carried out from early November 2020 to beginning of January 2021.

The results could be consulted [here](#).

[Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) (RRF) is the EUR 672.5 billion instrument (up to EUR 312.5 billion in grants and up to EUR 360 billion in loans) designed to support EU countries 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, known also as [Recovery Plan for Europe](#). 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.

[On 18 December 2020](#), the European Parliament and the Council of the EU found a political agreement on the facility. The Parliament is expected to vote on the text at its February plenary session, followed by formal adoption by the Council.

In October, the CoR Plenary adopted the opinion [European recovery plan: Recovery and Resilience Facility and Technical Support Instrument](#), drafted by Christophe Rouillon (FR/PES). Please find the press release [here](#).

The national Recovery and Resilience Plans must be [submitted by 30 April 2021](#) to the European Commission. The governance of this new instrument is closely aligned with the European Semester process of economic policy coordination. The lack of structured and systematic involvement of local and regional authorities in economic governance in general and in the European Semester in particular has been a repeated criticism of the CoR for several years. The Committee's remarks and proposal for an economic governance review of the EU are collected into [this](#) opinion drafted by the Minister-President of Wallonia, [Elio di Rupo](#) (BE/PES). The opinion was adopted in December by the Plenary. Please find the press release [here](#).

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## [Council agrees on strengthening the use of rapid antigen tests and on the mutual recognition of COVID-19 test results](#)



Member states have unanimously agreed today, by written procedure, on a Council recommendation setting a common framework for the use of rapid antigen tests and the mutual recognition of COVID-19 test results across the EU. This is a central tool to help mitigate the spread of the virus and contribute to the smooth functioning of the internal market; the mutual recognition of test results for SARS-CoV2 infection carried by certified health bodies is essential in order to facilitate cross-border movement, cross-border contact tracing and treatment.

Key components of this recommendation include the validation and mutual recognition of rapid antigen tests and RT-PCR tests among member states, the sharing of a standardised set of data (through a digital platform), the development of a common list of COVID-19 rapid antigen tests, the



prioritisation of situations for the use of such tests (e.g. contacts of confirmed cases, outbreak clusters) and more. The recommendation also includes future-proof provisions to address the challenges of the evolving pandemic: the common list of appropriate COVID-19 rapid antigen tests should be flexible enough for addition or removal of those tests whose efficacy is impacted by COVID-19 mutations.

## **Background**

European leaders invited in December 2020 the Commission to present a proposal for a Council recommendation on a common framework for rapid antigen tests and for the mutual recognition of test results. The Commission presented its proposal on 18 December 2020. This recommendation was negotiated in the relevant bodies of the Council and adopted under the Portuguese Presidency. The Council Recommendation is not legally binding; it sets out best practices, which member states are encouraged to follow.