



# Europol in Action

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Europol Executive Director



*Europol has been evolving and growing ever since its inception, from the Europol Drugs Unit in 1993 to now the EU agency for law enforcement cooperation. However, Europol's mission has remained unchanged – to support the Member States in ensuring the safety and security of citizens in the EU.*

*As the EU criminal information hub, Europol provides a platform for information exchange which is key to protecting citizens and ensuring free movement as core value of European integration. In 2020, 1,266,233 messages were exchanged through our secure communication platform (SIENA). Criminal analysis remains at the core of Europol's business and its operational support to Member States in their investigations on terrorism, serious and organised crime. In April, Europol will publish its flagship strategic analysis product, the EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA).*

*My ambition is to develop Europol further as a strong organisation that can address evolving security threats in an effective and efficient manner. The implementation of Europol Strategy 2020+ endorsed by the Europol Management Board is focusing on delivering the services most important to the EU Member States. As a priority, in 2020, Europol created the European Financial and Economic Crime Centre to respond to the threat of money laundering, scams and frauds and to tackle the main motivator of crime.*

*Europol's role in the EU security architecture has been recently recognised by the EU Home Affairs Ministers, in October 2020, at a conference on the 'Future of Europol' held by the German Presidency. The subsequent Council resolution adopted on 9 November 2020 provides strong political guidelines on strengthening and developing Europol to more effectively deal with the evolving security landscape and future challenges. Therefore, with the creation of the Europol Innovation Lab, Europol is aiming to be at the forefront of law enforcement innovation and research and to facilitate innovation in the EU. The new Counter-Terrorism Agenda also recognises the key role Europol plays in the fight against terrorism by reinforcing Europol's counterterrorism capabilities.*

*On 9 December 2020, the European Commission proposed a revised mandate for Europol to better deliver operational support to Member States' investigations. The Commission 2021 work programme will also significantly shape our work such as with the upcoming EU Agenda to tackle organised crime. New momentum in the fight against organised and serious crime is essential to disrupt high risk Organised Crime Groups, that are extensive, complex and operate in several Member States and beyond.*

*With these new policy developments and the upcoming discussions in the European Parliament and the Council on a revised legal mandate for Europol, my goal with this newsletter is to provide more insights into Europol's work in supporting EU Member States' law enforcement authorities in their investigations.*

## DARKMARKET: WORLD'S LARGEST ILLEGAL DARK WEB MARKETPLACE TAKEN DOWN

12 January 2021

DarkMarket, the world's largest illegal marketplace on the dark web, was taken offline in an international operation involving Germany, Australia, Denmark, Moldova, Ukraine, the United Kingdom (the National Crime Agency), and the USA (DEA, FBI, and IRS). Europol supported the takedown with specialist operational analysis and coordinated the cross-border collaborative effort of the countries involved. The vendors on the marketplace mainly traded all kinds of drugs and sold counterfeit money, stolen or counterfeit credit card details, anonymous SIM cards and malware.

One of Europol's initiatives is to create a coordinated law enforcement approach to tackle crime on the dark web. To achieve this goal, Europol's European Cybercrime Centre (EC3) has established a dedicated Dark Web Team to work together with EU partners and law enforcement across the globe to reduce the size of this underground illegal economy.

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## RETURNING FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTER DETAINED

12 January 2021

Europol supported an operation in Spain leading to the arrest of a member of the so-called Islamic State. The suspect had recently returned from the conflict zone on the border of Iraq and Syria. Two other individuals associated with the suspect were also arrested during the operation in Barcelona.

Law enforcement officers detected a potentially dangerous individual that had recently arrived in Spain. The investigation determined that this individual was hiding out in a run-down property in Barcelona. Officers later discovered that the suspect was not living there alone. The fact that the suspect was so determined to cover their tracks and the risk of their location meant officers were swift to act and arrest the individuals.

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## WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS MALWARE EMOTET DISRUPTED THROUGH GLOBAL ACTION

27 January 2021

Law enforcement and judicial authorities worldwide disrupted one of most significant botnets of the past decade: EMOTET. Investigators took control of its infrastructure in an international coordinated action. This operation is the result of a collaborative effort between authorities in the Netherlands, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Lithuania, Canada and Ukraine, with international activity coordinated by Europol and Eurojust. This operation was carried out in the framework of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT).

EMOTET was much more than just a malware. What made EMOTET so dangerous is that the malware was offered for hire to other cybercriminals to install other types of malware, such as banking Trojans or ransomwares, onto a victim's computer. Its unique way of infecting networks by spreading the threat laterally after gaining access to just a few devices in the network made it one of the most resilient malware in the wild.

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## NEW MAJOR INTERVENTIONS TO BLOCK ENCRYPTED COMMUNICATIONS OF CRIMINAL NETWORKS

*10 March 2021*

Judicial and law enforcement authorities in Belgium, France and the Netherlands have in close cooperation enabled major interventions to block the further use of encrypted communications by large-scale organised crime groups (OCGs), with the support of Europol and Eurojust. During an action day on 9 March 2021, a large number of arrests were made, as well as numerous house searches and seizures in Belgium and the Netherlands. The operation is an essential part of the continuous effort of judiciary and law enforcement in the EU and third countries to disrupt the illegal use of encrypted communications, as was already displayed last year following the successful de-encryption of the EncroChat communication platform.

As of mid-February, authorities have been able to monitor the information flow of approximately 70 000 users of Sky ECC. Many users of EncroChat changed over to the popular Sky ECC platform, after EncroChat was unveiled in 2020.

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## EUROPOL AND FRONTEX TO EXCHANGE LIAISON OFFICERS

*11 January 2021*

In December, Europol and Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency signed an agreement to exchange liaison officers. The agreement is part of the Joint Action Plan signed by the Executive Directors of the two agencies last year, aimed at strengthening the agencies' common effort in enhancing the security of EU citizens.

The liaison officers will contribute to information exchange between both agencies. The first liaison officers will start working in Warsaw and The Hague later this year.

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## EUROPOL AND EPPO ESTABLISH WORKING RELATIONSHIP

21 January 2021

The European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) and Europol, the EU Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, have set the basis of their future cooperation, in the form of a working arrangement. The working arrangement was approved late 2020 by EPPO's College and Europol's Management Board and signed in Luxembourg by the European Chief Prosecutor, Laura Kövesi, after Europol's Executive Director Catherine De Bolle signed it in The Hague.

Cooperation will mainly exist through the exchange of information between the two parties regarding, for instance, specialist knowledge or criminal investigation procedures, but also through the mutual participation in training activities as well as the provision of advice and support in individual criminal investigations.

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## ORGANISED CRIME GROUPS FUEL A RISE IN VIOLENT CRIME IN THE EU

29 January 2021

[A new report by Europol](#) warns that organised crime groups are increasingly employing violence in pursuit of their criminal objectives, and such violence represents a threat to public security in the EU. Based on the analysis of contributions made by Member States to Europol in recent years, there has been a rise in the number of violent incidents associated with serious and organised crime. Furthermore, the analysis points to an increasing willingness from criminal groups to resort to lethal violence.

The rise in violence in illicit markets can be tied to growing competition among criminal networks. Most drug-related fatal and serious violence have been reported in cocaine and cannabis markets, which have recently attracted new players.

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## EUROPOL WARNING ON THE ILLICIT SALE OF FALSE NEGATIVE COVID-19 TEST CERTIFICATES

1 February 2021

As long as travel restrictions remain in place due to the pandemic, it is very likely that criminals will seize the opportunity of producing and selling fake COVID-19 test certificates, warns a Europol Early Warning Notification published today. Several cases have already emerged of fraudulent COVID-19 test certificates being sold to travellers.

Member States are encouraged to share any relevant information on criminal activities related to fake COVID-19 test documentation with Europol.

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## **COVID-19 CHIEFS OF POLICE WORKING GROUP MEETS TO TALK PANDEMIC AND FIGHTING CRIME THREATS**

*15 February 2021*

On Friday 12 February, Europol's Executive Director, Catherine De Bolle welcomed Vittorio Rizzi, Deputy Director-General of Police and Director of the Criminal Police in Italy, to Europol's headquarters. The COVID-19 chiefs of police working group is an important initiative for law enforcement agencies to work together in monitoring the situation and coordinating the appropriate responses.

European chiefs of police from Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and INTERPOL joined the virtual meeting to discuss the latest developments in criminality related to COVID-19 and the priorities of the working group.

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## **EUROPOL AND THE WORLD ANTI-DOPING AGENCY TO TACKLE DOPING TOGETHER**

*18 February*

On 18 February 2021, Europol and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to reinforce the cooperation in the fight against the illegal production and distribution of doping substances and their use for the manipulation of sports competitions.

Several investigations supported by Europol have uncovered that the use of doping substances to influence the outcome of professional sports competitions is a recurring phenomenon. By countering organised crime groups involved in the corruption of sports and the production, trafficking and use of doping substances, Europol contributes to the integrity of sports, to fair and transparent competitions, ensuring that success belongs to the best, a key objective of clubs, athletes and sports enthusiasts alike.

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## **TRACE AN OBJECT INITIATIVE EXPANDS TO THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION**

*1 March 2021*

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) has launched its own version of the Europol 'Stop Child Abuse - Trace An Object' public appeal to help identify more children victim of sexual abuse. A total of nine non-confrontational details of images extracted from child sexual abuse cold cases are being made public today by the AFP, such as piece of clothing or bedding.

Investigators believe the victims are in the Asia Pacific region, including Australia, and are calling on the public to view the images and contact the AFP-led Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) if they recognise the objects.

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