

Eurojust action against criminal groups abusing corona crisis

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✖ Eurojust has taken action in various cases of online fraud and computer hacking by criminal organisations abusing the current COVID 19-crisis. At the request of, for instance, Germany, France and the Czech Republic, cross-border investigations are actively supported, regarding fake sales of protective face masks and hand gels. In the Czech Republic, criminals have even hacked the computer system of a hospital, forcing its temporary closure. Eurojust, the EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, is assisting national authorities in the follow-up of this case.

The Agency has furthermore stepped up its support to judicial authorities to execute the European Arrest Warrant (EAW) in times of corona. A full mapping out of practical implications for prosecutors in the Member States has taken place, in close cooperation with the European Judicial Network (EJN).

Whilst ensuring full business continuity over the last weeks, various cases have been opened at Eurojust to assist and pursue investigations into online fraud by criminals pretending to sell protective face masks and gels. In Germany, for instance, the authorities uncovered a large-scale fraud with an offer of ten million face masks for a price of EUR 15 million, for which one German state had shown an interest. Alleged suppliers in Asia were supposed to deliver the masks to a German sales company, via other European distributors, to be finally handed over in The Netherlands.

The perpetrators tricked the German sales company into paying an advance of EUR 2.4 million to accounts in other European countries. On the day of the planned delivery in The Netherlands, it became clear that the German sales company had become the victim of fraud. The German desk at Eurojust provided active support to the investigations, ensuring judicial cooperation with three countries. Two suspects have been arrested in The Netherlands and over EUR 2 million have been frozen in assets.

In France, a company in Dijon became the victim of swindling by unknown perpetrators using a Hungarian enterprise, supposedly selling protection masks and hydro-alcoholic hand gel. The French company ordered protection supplies for an amount of EUR 132.500, which were never delivered, whilst the money had immediately been transferred to Hungary.

The Public Prosecutor's Office of Dijon issued a European freezing order to recover the money and requested Eurojust to facilitate its urgent execution. Via a rapid and close collaboration between the French and Hungarian National Desks, the total amount was successfully frozen on the Hungarian bank account. Further investigations are ongoing in this case.

In Brno in the Czech Republic, most of the computer system of a hospital was

recently hacked by a criminal organisation, which had encrypted the communications. This forced the temporary shutdown of the entire hospital in spite of the ongoing corona emergency, as hospital staff was unable to get adequate information on patients. Via Eurojust, European Investigation Orders and requests for Mutual Legal Assistance have been issued to France and Switzerland to follow up investigations.

Practical implications in times of the corona crisis

Eurojust continues to be fully operational. It will follow up all requests for judicial cooperation and support investigations in these and other corona-related cases. Between 13 and 31 March, [202 new cases have been opened](#) and eight coordination meetings have taken place. The Agency has as well stepped up efforts to support judicial authorities, ensuring criminals cannot hide behind national borders. In the past weeks, Eurojust has worked closely together with the EJM and Member States to map out the practical implications for judicial cooperation in the current situation, notably for the EAW.

The first results were presented in an informal meeting of EU Ministers of Justice on 6 April, who welcomed the initiative and asked the Agency and EJM to continue monitoring the situation. An EAW crisis group will be set up by the European Commission, in which Eurojust, EJM and the General Secretariat of the Council will participate.

Prosecutors and investigative judges have turned extensively to their National Desks at Eurojust and EJM contact points to process urgent requests related to the EAW in this special situation. Casework studies have revealed a number of recurring issues related to the execution of the arrest warrant.

In order to have all relevant information at hand, Eurojust and the EJM have swiftly compiled an inventory of key judicial measures taken at national level to respond to the global health crisis. The inventory covers measures by all EU Member States, Iceland and Norway and will be continuously updated as the crisis response further develops.

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