

Multiple fraud case unraveled in France

□Action day launched simultaneously in 16 European States by a French investigative judge with the support of Eurojust

26 April 2018

On 11 April, the large-scale 'Carton Rouge' operation was initiated by a French Investigative Judge from the Interregional Specialised Jurisdiction of Nancy (JIRS) in cooperation with the French Desk at Eurojust, leading to the arrest of 9 suspects in Paris and Marseille, the freezing of numerous bank accounts, as well as the blocking of internet sites throughout Europe. The organised crime group (OCG) behind this far-reaching swindling case is suspected of having committed the crimes of fraud, bank fraud, embezzlement, money laundering and participation in a criminal organisation.

Upon the French investigative judge's request, a case was opened at Eurojust in February 2018, initially involving two Member States. As the case evolved, the number of affected States rose to 16 (15 Member States and 1 third State). Eurojust assisted in the timely and efficient implementation of all necessary legal instruments, such as the execution of European Investigation Orders, and effectively responded to urgent requests for mutual legal assistance. On the action day, under Eurojust's coordination, national judicial and law enforcement authorities were mobilised across France and bank accounts of the OCG were frozen in several States. Eurojust's increased operational flexibility allowed once more for a highly successful outcome.

In the period between August and November 2017, the members of the OCG impersonated football agents who contacted 15 different French football clubs, claiming that certain football players' bank accounts had changed and, therefore, the footballers' salaries needed to be transferred to their allegedly new bank accounts. This fraudulently acquired capital was then further wired from those temporary accounts to accounts in Bulgaria and Malta for money laundering purposes.

In the course of the investigation, the French national authorities discovered a parallel swindle performed by the same perpetrators, involving a fake diamonds scheme. The victims were deceived into investing in non-existent diamonds to be supposedly resold at an 8 per cent profit, but never derived any benefit from the fictitious deal. The victims were tricked into investing their capital in bank accounts outside French territory.

A similar fraud case, performed by the same OCG, using bitcoins instead of diamonds, was also revealed to the investigating authorities. The proceeds of the OCG yielded by all three illegal activities amount to an estimated total of EUR 2 million, to the detriment of approximately 50 victims.

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Remarks by President Donald Tusk after his meeting with President Hashim Thaçi in Pristina

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Good afternoon. I am pleased to be in Pristina today and let me start by thanking President Thaçi for his hospitality and for the good meeting we just had.

My visit today is a part of a round trip in the region to prepare for our EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia on 17th May. During the summit, the EU should first and foremost reaffirm its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the region. Just like I expect, the EU will welcome the Western Balkan partners' strategic choice and shared commitment to European principles, values and unity. The European Union is and will continue to be the most reliable partner for the entire region.

This is also why our summit, in concrete terms, should improve connections with and within the region – in the area of transport, energy or digital. As well as human exchanges such as Erasmus+.

Likewise, we will also use the summit to discuss how to tackle some of our common security challenges, such as migrant smuggling, terrorism and organised crime.

Now let me turn to Kosovo more specifically. I want to congratulate you on the recent ratification of the border demarcation agreement with Montenegro. It put Kosovo one step closer to visa free travel to European Union. It was also proof that cross-party cooperation is possible on issues of vital interest to all Kosovars. I know for a fact that you will not give up but continue the reform process, fully respecting your international commitments. In the best interest of your country. Fighting organised crime and corruption to be effective, also needs political consensus in Kosovo.

We also discussed the state of the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. Without a comprehensive normalisation of relations with Serbia and full implementation of the agreements. I do not see how a breakthrough in relations with the EU could be achieved. I know it's going to be hard but I am still a cautious optimist.

Let me use this opportunity to thank President Thaçi, just as I thanked President Vučić yesterday, for the personal capital he has invested in the dialogue. I know this is a difficult and emotionally charged issue for both sides. But there is no viable alternative to normalisation. In fact, it comes down to a strategic choice that I am 100% convinced will pay off in the long run. Thank you.

(Check against delivery)

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Remarks by President Donald Tusk after his meeting with the members of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Press contacts

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Good afternoon. Let me start by thanking you for your hospitality. There is something special about being back in Sarajevo. A city so rooted in European history, so beautiful and always welcoming. This time I am here to prepare for the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia on 17 May. But today we also talked about Bosnia and Herzegovina and EU integration.

Let me start by making three points about the Sofia summit:

First, our summit should reaffirm the European perspective of the whole region. The European Union is and remains the most reliable partner for the Western Balkans. As by far the biggest investor, the biggest donor and the biggest trading partner for the whole region. This is also the case for your country. For example, more than 70% of your exports go to the European Union. And more important than trade, is our political partnership and shared values of democracy, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.

Secondly, the summit will aim to improve connections with and within the region – human, digital or infrastructure connections. In other words, we want to further connect the Balkans and the EU through concrete projects like roads and roaming. A good example of this is the signature today of a European Investment Bank loan worth 150 million Euro for two segments of the Corridor 5C pan-European highway, connecting Zenica with Mostar. One day this will be part of the transport arteries of a re-united Europe, helping to connect Mediterranean regions with Central European regions including my native Poland.

My third point is that we need to work together more closely to tackle common security challenges. Balkan security is European security. For both sides it is essential to invest even more in fighting trafficking and migrant smuggling, weapons and drugs smuggling, organised crime and terrorism. We will also discuss this at our summit in Sofia.

Let me now turn more specifically to Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is a lot of good will on the EU side. We stand ready to continue delivering on our promises. And to assist you in your efforts. But as friends we are also obliged to tell you what concerns us. One such issue is definitely the stalled electoral reform. The EU is ready to contribute to the successful resolution of the current impasse, which ultimately would be in the best interest of your country.

To conclude let me say that European history teaches us that inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions bring only pain and tragedy. But European history and the history of the European Union also teach us that reconciliation is indeed possible, even between sworn enemies during centuries. And that the result of reconciliation and cooperation is peace, prosperity and, in fact, a better life for everybody. As most Europeans, we all have different identities inside of us. These identities must live side by side, complement and reinforce each other. Thank you.

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Introductory remarks by Vice-President Dombrovskis at Citizens' Dialogue in Sofia

Добър ден! Радвам се да разговарям с вас. [Hello. I am happy to discuss with you today].

I'm very grateful for this opportunity to have this discussion and also to listen how people in Bulgaria see the European Union and the challenges we face, because it's important to constantly assess how we are doing, what is

expected and can be improved, and how we can move forward.

And it is clear that Bulgaria wants to move forward. Its Presidency is steering the EU through now a vital couple of months. It is no coincidence that Bulgaria, your Presidency, stands for three very important "B"s: *бъдеще* [*budeshte* = *future*], budget and the Balkans, and we have important decisions to take in those areas, including indeed our future budget, the strengthening of the euro area, strengthening our Security Union and deepening our relations with our neighbouring countries, to name just a few.

One issue for Bulgaria is its membership of the euro area. And like the country where I come from, Latvia, we also asked this question after we went through a profound financial and economic crisis. We firmly opted for euro adoption, since we found it to be an anchor of economic and monetary stability. Eventually, we managed to go from crisis to euro accession in five years. Of course, it required engagement at all levels of government and ownership among social partners, among others. We had to overcome a number of fears and myths. We had to put in a lot of effort to ensure that prices are stable and do not rise as a result of euro introduction. And that is perfectly doable.

In fact, in economic terms, there are clear benefits of the euro area: it lowers barriers for businesses, it can reduce interest rates, it brings a positive impact on growth as a result of full integration into the single market, and stronger growth eventually leads to higher living standards in the country.

Politically too, euro membership puts countries at the very core of the European Union. So also through joining euro, Bulgaria will gain additional political influence.

As for the preparedness of Bulgaria, I would say the preconditions are there: since the inception of our single currency, the exchange-rate of the lev has been pegged to the euro; you can choose to have your bank savings in euro. So in many ways you are already with one foot in the euro area.

And the Commission is here to support you to get you with a second foot in the euro area as well. President Juncker has made it very clear: the EU wants to support countries in their efforts to join the euro area. We stand with Bulgaria with this and we are ready to help you get ready for this. One issue is political support. But we also offer a new 'convergence facility' or, in other words, technical and financial assistance to make the adjustments needed. So there we can help countries to prepare and then prosper once inside Eurozone.

On the assessment of Bulgaria's readiness and we will publish our convergence report on 23rd of May. We see much strength in Bulgaria to have robust economic growth, way above EU average and solid fiscal policy, a balanced budget, one of the lowest public debt levels in the EU at 26% of GDP and going down, but of course there is still further work needed. For example, joining the euro also implies becoming part of the Banking Union, and in that sense there is further work in strengthening banking sector.

So to once again come back to my experience in joining the euro in Latvia, I can say that this road to the euro is maybe long and sometimes difficult. Sometimes it can be rocky. But it is a meaningful journey to make, because it mobilises minds and energy in the country to change it for the better and eventually to improve living standards of Bulgarians.

Thank you very much.