

Spanish and UK police forces recover €6 million in two-year long Ponzi scheme investigation



Hundreds of victims of a €15 million Ponzi scheme may soon recover up to 40% of their losses as a result of an international law enforcement effort to recover the ill-gotten funds.

The cooperation between the Spanish regional Catalan Police (Mossos d'Esquadra) and the UK West Yorkshire Police, facilitated by Europol, has made it possible for the Spanish authorities to recover over €6 million in the framework of an investigation into a Ponzi scheme exceeding €15 million with over 200 victims.

An investigation was launched at the beginning of March 2019 after a complaint was filed in Gerona, Spain, after the main suspect disappeared. Several other complaints soon followed, describing a pyramid fraud committed by the missing suspect, a Spanish national residing in the UK who duped his victims into investing in seemingly secure investments with high returns.

Returning stolen funds

Timely investigative support is vital in asset recovery cases that cross multiple borders in order to locate, freeze, confiscate and finally repatriate stolen assets.

Europol's [European Financial and Economic Crime Centre](#) (EFECC) supported the case from the onset and brought together the Spanish and British investigators at its headquarters to discuss procedural requirements and identify a clear way forward. Its asset recovery experts there after organised the intensive exchange of information needed to prepare for the confiscation of the ill-gotten assets.

The asset recovery approach which was in this case a major angle of the

investigation clearly paid off: over £642 000 was held in UK bank accounts from the outset and frozen to ensure it was secured for confiscation. The British investigators were also able to successfully trace back a consequent amount of the diverted funds which had been invested in online gambling companies, a luxury vehicle, jewellery and IT equipment.

After two years of intense cooperation, the West Yorkshire Police transferred at the end of April 2021 more than €6 million to the Spanish judicial authorities to be used, if the judicial process so decides, to compensate the victims. The main suspect has been in custody since 2019 by order of the Court of Gerona.

Confiscation is a strategic priority in the EU's fight against organised crime. The recovery of proceeds from crime deprives criminals of what they have strived to acquire and strengthens the notion that "crime should not pay". The faster the tracing of assets derived from crime is, the more effective the confiscation and recovery of criminal profits can be. Europol's EFECC helps investigators across Europe in identifying assets that have been illegally acquired on their territories and facilitates the exchanges of relevant information at European level.

Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures against ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaeda and persons, groups, undertakings and entities associated with them



On 15 April 2021, the Council adopted Decision (CFSP) 2021/613[1].

The Council Decision decided to add one person to the list of persons, groups, undertakings and entities set out in the Annex to Decision (CFSP) 2016/1693.

The Candidate Countries the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania[2], the country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidate Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the EFTA countries Iceland and Liechtenstein, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Armenia and Georgia align themselves with this

Council Decision.

They will ensure that their national policies conform to these Council Decisions.

The European Union takes note of this commitment and welcomes it.

[1] Published on 15.04.2021 in the Official Journal of the European Union no. L 129 I/4

[2] The Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

[Eight arrests for selling potentially dangerous food supplements online](#)



The investigation was finalised in the framework of the Europol-coordinated operation Shield II

Europol supported the Italian Carabinieri (NAS Carabinieri) and the Spanish National Police (Policía Nacional) in dismantling an organised crime group involved in the online sale of illegal food supplements containing active medical ingredients.

In 2019, NAS Carabinieri detected some food supplements, allegedly made of natural ingredients, which actually contained the pharmaceutical ingredients sildenafil and tadalafil. The product, recommended for the treatment of erectile dysfunction, was sold on a well-known e-commerce platform. The

results of analysis carried out on samples from test purchases of the product confirmed the presence of these active ingredients. Food supplements illegally containing a medical active ingredient could be sold in a deceptive way to consumers, generating high risks for public health. In this case, Sildenafil could be extremely harmful for individuals suffering from heart or blood circulation diseases.

The Spanish investigation followed the supply chain and identified that the company was registered in the United Kingdom, while the main perpetrators were operating from Spain. Based on information shared by the Italian Carabinieri through Europol, the Spanish Police then initiated the investigation carried out in the framework of operation Shield II, which led to the arrest of the suspects. Officers carried out twelve house searches in Spain and Italy and blocked seventeen websites. The final results of the operational activities include eight arrests (in Spain), the seizures of 32 500 packages of food supplements (both in Spain and Italy) and the freezing of 21 bank accounts containing a total of €3.5 million.

Europol supported the operation by facilitating information exchange and providing analytical support and operational coordination. During the action day, Europol experts cross-checked operational information in real-time against Europol's databases to provide leads for investigators in the field. Europol also deployed a top expert in Spain to provide technical expertise and support with the extraction and analysis of information from mobile devices.

Headquartered in The Hague, the Netherlands, Europol supports 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 various threat assessments to intelligence-gathering and operational activities, Europol has the tools and resources required to help make Europe safer.

[Enlargement: new enlargement methodology will be applied to Montenegro and Serbia](#)



The Council agreed on the application of the revised enlargement methodology to the accession negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia, after both candidate countries expressed their acceptance of the new methodology. The changes will be accommodated within the existing negotiating frameworks with Montenegro and Serbia during the next Intergovernmental Conferences.

The European Union and its Member States have consistently expressed their unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. This firm, merit-based prospect of full EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's own political, security and economic interests.

A credible accession perspective is the key driver of transformation in the region and enhancing the opportunities for our collective security and prosperity. It is a key tool to promote democracy, rule of law and the respect for fundamental rights, which are also the main engines of economic development, social integration and the essential anchor for fostering regional reconciliation and stability. Maintaining and enhancing this policy is indispensable for the EU's credibility, for the EU's success and for the EU's influence in the region and beyond.

Ana Paula Zacarias, State Secretary for European Affairs of Portugal

The enhancement of the accession process of Montenegro and Serbia focuses on the following elements:

- **A stronger focus on fundamental reforms:** it is essential and also in the candidate countries' own interest that they keep delivering on reform commitments and produce tangible results in their implementation. This is key to realising their European perspective. This requires a stronger focus throughout the accession process on the rule of law, fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform, as well as on economic criteria.
- **A stronger political steer:** a key element for enhancing the enlargement process, regular Intergovernmental Conferences at ministerial level, together with the Stabilisation and Association Councils, will strengthen the dialogue with the candidate countries and help focus efforts on key reforms that should allow for further progress.
- **An increased dynamism:** a clustering of the negotiating chapters should help candidate countries to accelerate their preparations by cross-fertilisation of efforts across individual chapters, and put a stronger focus on core sectors and the most important and urgent reforms. It should also help with identifying accelerated integration measures.
- Improving the **predictability** of the process, based on objective criteria and rigorous positive and negative conditionality.

Background

On 25 March 2020, the Council endorsed the Commission communication on '*Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*' of 5 February 2020, aiming to reinvigorate the accession process by making it more predictable, more credible, more dynamic and subject to stronger political steering. The new process is based on objective criteria, rigorous positive and negative conditionality, and reversibility. Its credibility is reinforced through an even stronger focus on fundamental

reforms, starting with the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration as well as the economies of the candidate countries.

Montenegro's accession negotiations started in June 2012, when the negotiating framework with Montenegro was presented at the first meeting of the accession conference at ministerial level, on 29 June 2012.

Serbia's accession negotiations started in January 2014, when the negotiating framework with Serbia was presented at the first meeting of the accession conference at ministerial level, on 21 January 2014.

Next steps

The elements of the revised enlargement methodology will be presented to each of the two candidate countries at the next meeting of the respective intergovernmental accession conference at ministerial level.

Over 56 400 cultural goods seized and 67 arrests in action involving 31 countries

Despite constraints imposed by the COVID-19, the 2020 edition of the Pandora operation targeting the illicit trafficking of cultural goods has been the most successful to date with over 56 400 cultural goods seized. These objects include archaeological objects, furniture, coins, paintings, musical instruments and sculptures.

Running between 1 June and 31 October 2020, Pandora V saw the involvement of customs and law enforcement authorities from 31 countries.

During the operational phase, tens of thousands of checks and controls were carried out in various airports, ports, border crossing points, as well as in the auction houses, museums and private houses. As a result, more than 300 investigations were opened, and 67 individuals arrested.

Given the global nature of this crime, operation coordination units working 24/7 were established by Europol on one side, and the World Customs Organization and INTERPOL on the other, to support the exchange of information as well as disseminate alerts, warnings and perform cross-checks in different international and national databases.

This operation was led by the Spanish Civil Guard (Guardia Civil), with the international coordination supported by Europol, INTERPOL and the WCO. PANDORA V was carried out in the framework of the [European Multidisciplinary](#)

Operational highlights

- A total of 27 300 archaeological artefacts were seized as a result of a single investigation carried out by French Customs (Douane). A suspect was arrested, who now faces a prison sentence and a fine of several hundred thousands of euros.
- The Spanish authorities seized more than 7 700 cultural goods including archaeological artefacts, coins, sculptures and statues, weapons, paintings and archives of sound, film and photography with a value in excess of €9 million.
- During the operational phase, the Spanish Civil Guard (Guardia Civil) also finalised a complex investigation initiated within the framework of Pandora III. As a result, one individual was arrested and 94 objects stolen in various places of worship were recovered. A total of €165 000 in cash was seized at his home. The arrestee is suspected of trying to sell online these stolen goods, such as a 16th century silver chalice and an illuminated manuscript of the Apocalypse by Beatus of Liébana.
- During searches on the internet, the Swedish Police (Polisen) identified a folk art item stolen in Sweden in 2019. At that same online auction, the Swedish Police discovered a pair of 17th century candlesticks stolen from a Swedish church 8 years ago.
- The Italian Carabinieri Corps (Arma dei Carabinieri) reported more than 2 700 cultural goods seized including ceramics, archaeological goods, art and books valued at €1 155 000.
- The Hellenic Police (Ελληνική Αστυνομία) carried out 34 arrests and recovered a total of 6 757 antiquities, including ceramic and marble objects, as well as 6 452 coins, 5 533 of which were recovered in one single investigation. In one case, two Greek nationals were arrested for trying to sell 6 marble and clay antiquities for €150 000.
- A total of 50 metal detectors were seized, and 6 of them were seized directly in archaeological sites, clearly demonstrating that such sites are under threat.
- Several hundreds of World War II grenades and other explosive devices were seized by the Police Force of the Slovak Republic (Policajný zbor Slovenskej republiky). This is a worrisome development as some of these old explosive devices are still functional and may lead to numerous casualties.

Results of the Cyber Patrol

Within the framework of the Operation Pandora V, the Dutch National Police (Politie) organised a five-day cyber patrol week focusing on online markets. Law enforcement from 15 countries, with the support of Europol, INTERPOL and WCO, identified suspicious sales online, as a result of which 15 new investigations were opened.

International coordination

Europol, as co-leader of this action, played a key role in implementing the entire operation by facilitating information exchange, and providing analytical and operational support. The WCO also facilitated intelligence exchange among different agencies through a special user group created on its CENComm communication platform.

INTERPOL connected Balkan and European participating countries, facilitating the exchange of information through its secure communications system. A dedicated expert supported the entire operation by double checking searches against INTERPOL's Stolen Works of Art database to locate and identify stolen and missing items.

Participating countries: Albania, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxemburg, Malta, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the United Kingdom



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. [Organised property crime](#) is one of the priorities for the Policy Cycle.