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The impact of COVID-19 on the EU's internal security – the role of police cooperation

Introduction

Europol has been monitoring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on crime and terrorism. Since the onset of the crisis, Europol has continuously monitored the evolution of crime in the pandemic context and has issued 31 strategic products in total, providing an updated intelligence picture to our Law Enforcement Partners, key stakeholders, policy makers and the general public. The supply of counterfeit and sub-standard products, organized property crime, cybercrime and financial crime have been the most notably impacted crime areas. In Q4 2020, Europol released its latest assessment on COVID-19 and crime with the latest reported developments summarized below. Europol has launched several prevention and awareness campaigns on our website to inform citizens of possible scams and other COVID related offences such as protecting children on the internet.

Counterfeit and sub-standard goods

Criminal groups have quickly leveraged the new business opportunities the pandemic has presented, shifting their market focus, taking advantage of widespread anxiety and the increased demand for certain products. The supply of counterfeit and sub-standard medical equipment, sanitary and pharmaceutical products has remained a significant criminal activity over the course of the pandemic. The international roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign presents additional lucrative opportunities for counterfeiters. Although so far in a limited manner, a few offers of fake vaccines have already appeared on the dark web. The risk of such offers being spread on the open web is considered to be even more significant. Fake vaccines may not only appear on illicit markets, but could also be 'injected' into the legal market for distribution. The misuse of used vials, COVID-19 vaccines residues and the illicit supply of syringes, injection needles and medical devices carries additional risks. Europol is actively monitoring both the open and the dark web to detect and disrupt any possible illicit vaccine related offers. Additionally, personal protective equipment related supply scams, which have proliferated during the crisis, are expected to be complemented or potentially replaced by vaccine-themed scams, including the bogus sales of negative COVID-19 tests.

Cybercrime

Cybercriminality has manifested its dynamic nature in the pandemic context; while the narrative of cybercriminal activities has been adapted, in essence, they have remained the same. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, an increased number of COVID-19 themed domains have been created to facilitate different cybercrime activities. The number of

cyber-enabled and pandemic-related scams, COVID-19 themed malware, ransomware and phishing attacks notably increased during the pandemic, targeting individuals, businesses and the health sector alike. In relation to the COVID-19 vaccine, incidents perpetrated against laboratories, pharmaceutical and medical entities have already been reported.

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)

The production and distribution of online Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) remains higher than compared to pre-pandemic levels, due to new attacks surfaces (e.g. Zoom) and increased time spent online by children. During the lockdown period in March-April 2020, an increase in detected CSAM on online platforms providing social media and messaging services was reported to Europol by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). Though this trend returned to usual levels when the lockdown measures were lifted in most Member States, referrals rose again throughout the EU in the end of the summer of 2020. The new partial or full lockdown measures re-introduced in several Member States from Q4 2020 have likely further sustained the rise in the production and distribution of CSAM.

Fraud schemes and financial crime

Fraudsters have quickly adapted the theme of 'business-as-usual' fraud schemes, fitting the COVID-19 narrative in order to exploit widespread anxiety, ensuing economic hardship, targeting individual citizens, businesses and public organisations.

The reported scam schemes have included various types of adapted versions of telephone fraud schemes, supply scams and decontamination scams. During the crisis, organized crime groups were observed to exploit legal business structures to orchestrate supply and fraud schemes, facilitate the distribution of counterfeit goods and conduct their money laundering activities. With a potential economic hardship unfolding in the post-pandemic reality, it is expected that different types of fraud schemes, including the defrauding of national and European economic stimulus packages, will proliferate and the risk of criminal infiltration into the legal economy will intensify.

Migrant smuggling

Despite the movement restrictions, migrant smugglers have remained resourceful during the pandemic. Unusual landings of wooden boats on the Western Mediterranean route in Portugal were reported, triggering alerts of the potential use of the so-called 'mother boats'. Some other changes in modus operandi, such as an increase in smuggling incidents on foot to cross the border to then continue the facilitation in vehicles was also noted along some of the Western Balkan routes. Several smugglers active along this route have been reported to advertise their facilitation services using dedicated groups on social media.

Terrorism

The threat posed by terrorism remained significant during 2020. The number of jihadist-inspired attacks continued to be high in 2020. Left-wing terrorist groups have been observed to resort to more violence against non-civilian targets, particularly in Southern Europe. Right-wing extremists were witnessed to expand their influence and reach by increasing their online presence. Even though so far COVID-19 seems to have had minimal direct impact on the threat level of terrorism, the increased importance of the digital environment has become an even more fertile ground for the dissemination of malicious narratives. Member States and Europol noted an increase in propaganda published on terrorist and extremist scenes, framing the virus to their own ideological narratives.

The role of police cooperation

Besides continuously collecting, processing, analysing and disseminating information on the impact of COVID-19 on serious and organized crime, Europol has engaged in a set of additional operational and strategic activities during the crisis. The Europol Platform for Experts vROOM (virtual Requests Out Of Mandate) was set up in order to provide Law Enforcement partners a secure platform for the exchange of strategic information on out-of-mandate matters related to the pandemic.

Though there were lockdowns across Europe, cross border crime did not stop. The COVID-19 pandemic made us have to rethink how we work in order for law enforcement to continue to cooperate virtually. The pandemic showed the need for secure video conferencing and instant messaging channels for law enforcement. Europol has introduced a secure video conference application, which allows for the exchange of operational data, which is accessible to EU Member States' Liaison Bureaux. This has allowed Europol and EU law enforcement to shift towards cooperating virtually during this pandemic. Also during the pandemic, Europol hosted one of the largest operations to date, Operation EMMA, which led to the dismantling of EncroChat, an encrypted phone network widely used by criminal networks. Europol hosted officers from the Member States concerned during the operation.

Europol has rapidly adapted to the crisis situation, equipping its operational and strategic analysts and specialists with appropriate means (so-called Mobile Offices) in order to ensure information flow and the provision of operational and strategic analysis services to its partners. The support of Europol continued and was not significantly hampered by the pandemic. The overall number of SIENA messages exchanged between Member States, Third Parties and Europol increased by 1.8 percent in 2020.

Recent operational activities related to the COVID – Pandemic and crime

Operation Retrovirus 2020

One of the side-effects of the pandemic has been a considerable increase in the output of medical and sanitary waste, which has presented a business opportunity for waste traffickers. Already at an early stage of the crisis, Europol reported on the potential growth in unlawful sanitary waste treatment and disposal, as a result Europol launched operation Retrovirus. Europol identified the need for operational activity on this phenomenon early in the pandemic and launched the operation worldwide. During the operation:

-) 278 291 inspections were performed
-) 102 arrests were made
-) More than 819 entities and individuals were given administrative sanctions
-) €800 000 in assets were seized
-) 22 seizures of waste were performed

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/covid-19-waste-crime-europe-wide-operation-to-tackle-unlawful-sanitary-waste-disposal>

Operation Shield 2020

Europol coordinated operation Shield, a global effort to target trafficking of counterfeit and misused medicines and doping substances. Amongst these, COVID-19 related fakes were also seized, namely COVID-19-related fakes

Europol Public Information

-) Almost 33 million medical devices seized (face masks, tests, diagnosis kits)
-) 8 tonnes of raw materials, chemicals and antivirals seized
-) 70 000 litres of hygiene sanitizers seized

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/medicines-and-doping-substances-worth-%E2%82%AC73-million-seized-in-europe-wide-operation>

Strategic activities

The latest iteration of COVID-19 monitoring report 'How COVID-19-related crime infected Europe during 2020' was issued in November 2020. The next update is expected in Q1 2021.

In September and November 2020, Europol co-chaired together with Italy the COVID-19 Working Group, with the next one planned in February 2021.

In March 2021, Europol will present its Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment, a dedicated chapter on COVID and crime will be included.