

Article for the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group on Europol

In a Europe based on values, democratic oversight is essential

Security and freedom belong together.

Freedom without security is the law of the jungle. Security without freedom is a police state.

What brings freedom and security together is trust. Fighting crime restores trust in the ability of authorities to protect people. And democratic oversight improves trust in our law enforcement agencies.

In a Europe based on values, democratic oversight over security and law enforcement bodies is essential. We fight crime in Europe together, we must also organise democratic oversight together.

That European oversight is the mission of the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group on Europol, a relatively new but absolutely unique parliamentary body, in which the European Parliament and national parliaments together make sure we stick to our values and keep Europeans safe.

In a few short years, the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group has helped to contribute to the oversight of Europol and its cooperation with the Member States. The importance of the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group will only increase, as Europol now faces greater challenges than ever before.

The last months we have witnessed a change in the criminal landscape as organised crime has shifted its attention to corona-related crime. Criminals are adapting to the virus and taking advantage of sick and scared people and governments who are looking for the necessary tools to protect medical staff, by selling fake cures, disinfectants and medical masks, raising prices or not even delivering such products at all despite having received the money. We are getting many indications that online child sexual abuse is on the increase.

Europol fights these crimes every day. Since the start of the outbreak, Europol and other European and international law enforcement bodies helped to arrest child sexual abuse suspects in Italy, Hungary and Spain. Europol supported a major global operation that identified 90 child sexual abuse suspects. Europol also helped to foil a €15 million face mask scam, and a €6.6 million face mask scam defrauding a French company.

We now need to continue our efforts to keep our citizens safe. Because the coronavirus also reinforces existing trends. Organised crime has been on the rise for many years and is perhaps the biggest threat to the safety of our people and the democratic nature of our societies. There are now 5,000 criminal groups active in Europe – 50 per cent more than in 2013.

And in these digital times, cybercrime was already an increasing menace. Even before Covid19, online child sexual exploitation was reaching epidemic proportions. Reports of online child sexual abuse increased from 23,000 in 2010 to more than 800,000 in 2019. According to Internet Watch, Europe last year became the sad global leader in hosting child sexual abuse imagery.

To counter these crimes, we are building interoperability – efficient data exchange is essential to catch cross-border criminals. We must do more when it comes to sharing criminal investigation data such as DNA and fingerprints among Member States' law enforcement agencies.

With criminals more and more active online, law enforcement cannot stay behind. It must become easier to exchange electronic evidence across borders, because the overwhelming majority (85%) of criminal investigations relies on electronic proof.

Criminals must pay for their crimes – but crime must never pay. Organised crime groups make an estimated €110 billion in profits every year, yet only one percent of these are confiscated. At the beginning of June 2020, the Commission published a major report on improving asset recovery. We will build on its conclusions to consider effective measures. We will also combat the smuggling of guns, drugs, and humans – crimes that not only hurt people but also are a source of income for criminals.

We will continue to fight terrorism, which remains a threat, from islamists and increasingly from the far right. We will finalise negotiations on terrorist content online, to stop terrorists spreading their messages of hate. After the virus, people will start going to football matches, museums and concerts again – and so will the terrorists. The Commission will present proposals to protect people in public places and to protect critical infrastructure. We will strengthen our defences against Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear threats. And we will continue to work together in Europe to counter radicalisation.

I want to help the European crime fighters of Europol and their colleagues in the Member States to do their jobs, by boosting the mandate of Europol. For example:

Europol should be able to exchange data directly with private parties – banks for financial crimes and internet companies for terrorist content online and child sexual abuse. Because data held by private parties is crucial to solving such crimes.

In times of digital change, Europol must continue to prevent crimes. Digital developments in data gathering and criminal intelligence are rapidly outpacing our rules and laws. Big data, digital forensics and travel intelligence offer new challenges that lawmakers could not yet imagine ten years ago. We will assess how to update Europol's rulebook for a digital age.

We should also think about how we can facilitate Europol's information exchange worldwide, which is necessary because crime and terror threats do not end at the European border.

Greater responsibility for Europol also means greater responsibility for the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group. I know and trust, that its members will carry out their task with dedication and commitment.

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