Criminal Infiltration of EU Ports

Cornelia Riehle

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AUTHOR

Cornelia Riehle

Deputy Head of Section
Academy of European Law

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On 5 April 2023, Europol - together with the Security Steering Committee of the ports of Antwerp, Hamburg/Bremerhaven, and Rotterdam - published a joint analysis report looking into the risk and challenges that criminal networks in EU ports pose for law enforcement. The report details how the EU ports' infrastructures are infiltrated by organised crime, how illicit goods are trafficked and extradited from maritime containers, and how container reference codes are misappropriated in the ports of Antwerp, Hamburg/Bremerhaven, and Rotterdam. It also shows how corruption plays a key role in enabling the infiltration of ports.

According to one of the main points of the report, when the sheer volume of containers handled each year in EU ports (over 90 million) is set against the low percentage of containers that can be physically inspected (2-10%), the detection of illicit goods becomes extremely challenging. In addition, infiltration opportunities for criminal networks are manifold, due to the many public and private actors with access to port infrastructure and port information. Hence, criminal networks target logistics companies with corrupt actors and container shipments that are less likely to be inspected. To extract illicit goods from the ports, the modus operandi currently being used is "PIN code fraud", i.e. the use of misappropriated container reference codes: criminals obtain, by corrupt means, the container reference code of the container in which the illicit goods are concealed. Using this code, which is normally intended to confirm that the container can be released in the destination port and picked up by the client, criminals retrieve the container from the port terminal pretending to be the legitimate client.

While major EU ports are already looking into solutions to counter illicit goods trafficking by, for instance, changing procedures, developing more secure database systems, and implementing innovative technologies (e.g. combining imaging and artificial intelligence to increase the screening rate of containers and goods), the report reveals that secondary EU ports are now likely to become the target of criminal networks. Furthermore, concerns have been raised that the planned connection of 328 EU ports to the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T policy) - the EU's policy for the development of coherent, efficient, multimodal, and high-quality transport infrastructure across the EU - could reinforce this trend.

For these reasons, the report calls for a common Europe-wide approach giving attention to regional aspects, including legislative initiatives to streamline security measures in ports. Preventive and investigative actions, such as public-private partnerships to involve all port actors, are also essential for tackling the infiltration of criminal networks in EU ports.

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