

# EPPO's Operational Activities: January – March 2024

Cornelia Riehle

## News

This news item provides an overview of the EPPO's main operational activities from 1 January to 31 March 2024. It continues the periodic analyses of recent issues (last: → [eucriM 4/2023, 322-324](#)) and reports in reverse chronological order.

- 29 March 2024: At the end of March, the EPPO in Vilnius and the Lithuanian Financial Crime Investigation Service carries out active evidence-collecting activities with regard to [suspected fraud involving a former assistant of a Lithuanian Member of the European Parliament](#). The investigation concerns the non-performance or imitation of actual functions of a parliamentary assistant with the aim of obtaining remuneration and collecting unemployment benefits.
- 26 March 2024: Under the code-name [‘Fuel Family’](#), the EPPO in Naples, Bologna, and Rome (Italy) dismantles a criminal gang alleged to have imported fuel into the Italian market while systematically evading VAT. The alleged criminals are believed to have imported the fuel from suppliers in Croatia, Slovenia, and other countries, using a chain of more than 40 "missing traders" in Italy, who would vanish without fulfilling their tax obligations. The fraudulent activities are believed to have generated invoices for simulated transactions amounting to over €1 billion, causing an estimated damage of around €260 million in unpaid VAT. The criminal group is also suspected of laundering over €35 million in illicit proceeds. As the fuel could be sold at extremely advantageous prices, the fraud also distorted the principles of fair competition on the market.
- 6 March 2024: An [Italian entrepreneur](#) is charged with engineering a €41.8 million VAT fraud scheme and misappropriating €6.7 million in public funds, among other offences. The investigation by the EPPO in Milan (Italy) showed that the entrepreneur committed intra-community VAT carousel fraud via two companies owned and operated by him as well as a chain of missing traders active in the wholesale trade of computer equipment and broadcasting technology. Furthermore, the entrepreneur fraudulently received public funding based on forged documentation that falsely represented the company's economic, asset-based, and financial reality as well as the fictitious establishment of a company.
- 6 March 2024: The EPPO in Cologne (Germany) [brings charges against five main suspects](#) of an organised crime group, who are suspected of engaging in large-scale VAT fraud involving international trade with more than 10,000 cars that generated a total turnover of over €190 million and VAT losses of €53.7 million. 60 persons are suspected of participating in the organised group or supporting the main suspects. During [investigation ‘Huracán’](#) 130 cars were confiscated in June 2023 (→ [eucriM 2/2023, 127](#)> entry 14 June 2023); 90 cars had already been sold by the authorities, with a view to recovering the financial damage. Other seized goods include real estate and €2 million in cash.

### AUTHOR

**Cornelia Riehle**

Deputy Head of Section  
Academy of European Law

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- 28 February 2024: The EPPO in Munich and Cologne (Germany) moves against a suspected criminal organisation that allegedly orchestrated a €195 million VAT carousel fraud through the sale of smartphones, small electronic devices, and protective face masks. By means of a complex criminal ecosystem, the criminal organisation created layers of shell companies, straw men, fictitious identities, and secret communications. Under the [investigation cluster 'Midas'](#), more than 180 searches are carried out and 14 people arrested in 17 countries. Over 680 tax and police investigators support the investigative measures. 14 European Delegated Prosecutors in 12 Member States team-up with numerous national authorities, Europol, and Eurojust to take action.
  - 27 February 2024: The large-scale investigation '[Final Toast](#)' (conducted by the EPPO in Palermo (Italy)) leads to precautionary measures against ten suspects, one of whom the son of a member of the 'Santapaola' mafia clan. The criminal association is suspected of aggravated VAT fraud involving beverages, money laundering, fraudulent bankruptcy, and EU funding fraud. Through a system of fake invoices for non-existent goods, fictitious transactions via foreign-based companies, and missing traders, the beverages could be sold at artificially low prices, undercutting legitimate competitors and resulting in VAT losses exceeding €30 million. Additionally, the suspects received co-funding from the EU for the organisation of training courses for employees of various affiliated companies that never took place.
  - 25 January 2024: An investigation led by the EPPO in Turin (Italy) results in the freezing of almost €40 million and the seizure of 47 bank accounts, 11 real estate properties, four cars, and €56.000 in crypto currencies as well as the shutdown of several websites. The suspected criminal organisation allegedly used a chain of fictitious companies in several EU Member States [to sell tyres](#) for cars and other motor vehicles to customers in Italy via various e-commerce platforms, without collecting or reimbursing VAT in any EU Member State. The company is estimated to have generated a turnover of €178 million.
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