

# EPPO's Operational Activities: mid-November – December 2023

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## News

This news item provides an overview of EPPO's main operational activities from 16 November to 31 December 2023. It continues the periodic reports of the last issues (→ [euCRIM 3/2023, 247-248](#)) and is in reverse chronological order.

- 21 December 2023: The EPPO in Zagreb (Croatia) [indicts a farm owner and a public official](#) at the Ministry of Agriculture for subsidy fraud and abuse of office and authority, following an investigation into projects for building a winery and planting a vineyard, co-funded by the EU. The farm owner allegedly submitted false statements to meet the eligibility criteria. The public official is accused of having decided in favour of the application against his better judgement.
- 11/12 December 2023: At the request of the EPPO in Athens (Greece), [10 persons are arrested and eight luxury cars](#), several other motor vehicles, a high number of mobile phones and over €50,000 in cash are seized. The raids target a criminal organisation that established a missing trader intra-community fraud involving the trade in consumer electronics (mainly mobile phones) since the beginning of 2018. The EPPO investigation has revealed estimated losses to the EU and national budgets of €36.4 million. Furthermore, the organisation is suspected of having used its company network to siphon subsidies of nearly €10 million received as financial aid from the Greek State and the EU for the recovery of businesses from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 11 December 2023: The [EPPO in Athens charges 23 suspects](#) for crimes in relation to the execution of contracts for restoring remote traffic control and signalling systems on the Greek rail network, co-funded by the EU Cohesion Fund. The EPPO's investigations found that the two companies constituting the contractor consortium arbitrarily breached the contract with the subsidiary of the Greek Railway Organisation (ERGOSE). The consortium and ERGOSE also colluded in unlawfully modifying the contract which led to an increase of unwarranted costs. Officials of the Managing Authority, responsible for overseeing the use of the funds, are alleged to have approved the distribution of corresponding funds despite the fact that employees of ERGOSE submitted patently inaccurate and false documents. As a result, 14 public officials of ERGOSE are charged with subsidy fraud; 4 public officials of the Greek Managing Authority of the EU's Operational Programme for Transport Infrastructure, Environment and Sustainable Development are charged with misappropriation of funds; and 5 legal representatives and employees of the consortium contractor are charged with instigation of subsidy fraud and instigation of false certification with the purpose of obtaining an unfair advantage for another person.
- 8 December 2023: The EPPO in Zagreb (Croatia) in Zagreb (Croatia) officially initiates an [investigation against a former minister and a former employee](#) of Croatia's Ministry of Regional Development and

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EU Funds (MRRFEU) for abuse of office and authority. The two persons are alleged to have had the minister's private restaurant visits and parties financed by the EU Cohesion fund.

- 6 December 2023: Following operation "Admiral" of 29 November 2022 (→ eucrim 4/2022, 237), the first indictment is filed. The [EPPO in Porto \(Portugal\) charges](#) 12 suspects and 15 companies for aggravated tax fraud, money laundering and active and passive corruption in the private sector. The defendants are suspected of having set up and orchestrated one of the largest intra-community VAT fraud schemes ever detected in the EU. Their illegal trade in electronic devices involved over 9000 companies and 600 individuals located in different countries. Criminal activities spread throughout over 30 countries. It is estimated that losses to the national and EU budgets amount to over €2.2 billion. The damage in Portugal alone amounts to over €80 million. If found guilty, defendants face up to 25 years of imprisonment.
- 5 December 2023: Following an investigation by the EPPO in Palermo and Rome (Italy), a house arrest against one suspect and the [seizure of €4.5 million against six companies](#) is executed. Under investigation are several aquaculture producers who are suspected of having artificially inflated the project costs for the construction and refurbishment of production sites and of having obtained illicit profits that were used for other purposes than those established in the project application. The project was co-funded by the EU's European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) Operational Program 2014–2020.
- 4 December 2023: The EPPO offices in Luxembourg City and Frankfurt am Main (Germany) have several searches carried out. [Police and tax authorities seize 17 bank accounts](#), cash, gold and cryptocurrencies. The measures target a criminal group that is suspected of having set up a missing trader intra-community fraud scheme involving the trade in small electronic devices (mainly AirPods). Shell companies are also based in Italy.
- 28 November 2023: The EPPO in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) has [offices of the Municipality of Deda and other premises searched](#) in a probe into the misuse of EU funds. It is suspected that funds for inclusion and anti-discrimination projects were used for other purposes by persons involved in the project or their associates. The funding amounted to a total of €5.5 million of which the EU co-funded over €4.6 million.
- 23 November 2023: In an investigation into the [misuse of funds from the EU Rural Development Programme](#) 2014-2020, the EPPO in Sofia (Bulgaria) has several locations searched. It is suspected that the Boychinovtsi Municipality received funding for road construction works (€2.6 million) which were never completed.
- 22 November 2023: Law enforcement authorities in Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland, with the support of Europol, carry out the [operation code-named "Goliath"](#). Nearly 60 companies and premises are searched and assets seized, including two luxury cars and several luxury watches. The operation under the lead of the EDP in Hamburg (Germany) targets a VAT fraud scheme involving the international trade in consumers electronics. The losses to the national and EU budgets are estimated at €85 million. Investigations found evidence that suspects established companies in Germany, other EU Member States, and non-EU countries, in order to trade the goods through a fraudulent chain of missing traders without paying VAT.
- 21 November 2023: Investigators strike a [blow against VAT fraudsters](#). At the request of the EPPO on Madrid (Spain), 13 searches were carried out and 24 people arrested in several Spanish cities. The EPPO's investigations concern a large-scale VAT fraud with an estimated damage of more than €25 million. An organised crime group is suspected of having orchestrated a missing trader fraud scheme with IT equipment involving Spain, Belgium, Lithuania, Romania and Latin American countries.
- 17 November 2023: The EPPO reports that, in a [joint action](#) prepared by the EPPO in Athens (Greece) and Cologne (Germany), law enforcement agents carried out 42 searches in Greece and Germany and seized several luxury cars, goods with a value of more than €100,000, a large number of smartphones,

laptops and desktop computers, and more than €250,000 in cash. Two people were arrested in Greece on the basis of EAW requests from the EPPO in Cologne. German and Greek EDPs are investigating a missing trader VAT fraud involving small electronic devices. It is estimated that the suspects evaded more than €30 million in VAT.

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