

# OLAF Activity Report 2021: Record Sum Recommended for Recovery

Thomas Wahl

News

In 2021, OLAF recommended the recovery of over €527 million to the EU budget – around €234 million more than in 2020 and over € 40 million more than in 2019. The year 2021 continued to be marked by fraud schemes in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic as well as prevention work by OLAF staff, in particular as regards the Recovery and Resilience Facility with a future investment volume of over € 720 billion. Other key issues in [the 2021 OLAF activity report](#), which was published on 8 June 2022, are new fraud trends detected in 2021 in a number of areas and OLAF’s contribution to ensure the EU’s green transition. The key figures regarding OLAF’s performance in 2021 are as follows (for activity reports of previous years, (→ [eucrim 2/2021, 80-81](#); → [eucrim 3/2020, 167](#) and → [3/2019, 163](#))):

- OLAF concluded 212 investigations and issued 294 recommendations to the relevant national and EU authorities;
- OLAF opened 234 new investigations, following 1,100 communications received and analysed by OLAF experts.

Anti-fraud investigations mainly revealed four new trends in 2021:

- Establishment of more sophisticated and adaptable means to profit from the pandemic;
- Organised crime groups increasingly seeking EU money from grants and loans through e.g. double funding or manipulation of tenders;
- New scams in relation to green and digitalization projects, which are the main priorities of the EU budget in the years to come;
- Adaptation of fraud schemes in order to make the detection of revenue fraud more difficult, e.g. by breaking up shipments of goods into smaller consignments, establishing shell companies in many jurisdictions, making underevaluations, etc.

The report stressed that fraud investigations involving COVID-19-related products and productions in relation to the green transition (including waste management) showed that human health and safety as well as the environment are increasingly likely to suffer collateral damage caused by ruthless fraud schemes which solely pursue the making of illicit profits.

The focus chapter of the 2021 report deals with OLAF’s role in preventing environmental damage and protecting the EU’s green recovery. On the basis of various investigated cases, the report gives an overview of OLAF’s support to prevent the arrival and entry into the EU of dangerous products that irreparably harm the environment. The interest of fraudsters in green projects is also shown which helps anticipate potential future fraud patterns. An example is trafficking of waste where fraudsters take advantage of the gap

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between waste production and recovery capacities. According to the report, it is estimated that up to 30% of all waste shipments may be illicit, which is thought to be worth €9.5 billion annually for criminals.

Another key event in 2021 was the operational start of the EPPO (→ [eucrim 2/2021, 82-83](#) and [eucrim special issue no. 1/2021](#)). The new layer to the protection of the EU's financial interests also changed OLAF's work. The EPPO opened 85 cases (with an estimated total damage to the EU budgets of around € 2.2 billion) as a result of OLAF's reporting. In 2021, OLAF investigators and forensic analysts provided substantial support to EPPO investigations, most notably by participating in witness interviews as experts and providing detailed analysis of customs matters. The cooperation with the EPPO resulted in 26 complementary investigations that yielded some important results (for the cooperation agreement between the EPPO and OLAF → [eucrim 2/2021, 80](#) and the contribution by *N. Kollozcek* and *J. Echanove Gonzalez de Anleo*, [eucrim 3/2021, 187-190](#)).

When presenting the report, OLAF Director-General *Ville Itälä* stressed that "Prevention is the most effective tool that we have, and it is at the heart of the work of OLAF and the EU institutions." He referred in this context to a case in which OLAF's investigations succeeded in the stop of a potential misuse of €330 million. In addition, a dedicated task force was involved in the screening of the national plans for the Recovery and Resilience Facility. OLAF experts advised the European Commission on adequate measures of fraud prevention in the national plans which had to be approved for all 27 EU Member States.

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