

Conference on Integrity in Sport

Hybrid format: Rome (Villa Ruffo, Via di Villa Ruffo 27) and online
6-7 December 2021

Organised by the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS) of the Council of Europe and the Italian Department for Sports

Speaking note

First of all, I would like to thank the CoE and the Italian Department for Sports for inviting Europol to attend this Conference which is gathering so many distinguished colleagues from different countries.

I would like to start going straight to the point by saying that Europol is today strongly engaged and fully committed in the process of addressing the fight against corruption in sport and in particular the manipulation of sports competitions by providing the best operational support to our MS and operational partners in the EU and beyond.

As probably most of you know, Europol is engaged in this important task for already many years now, since the first big cases rocketed the world of football at global level starting in 2011.

Since then we have witnessed several changes at operational, policy and political level that had a positive impact on our work and on the work of the law enforcement community engaged in fighting corruption in sport and more in particular the manipulation of sports competitions. Important achievements have been made, thanks to a continued and increased commitment of governments, sports organisations, and many other national and international stakeholders that continue to be so active in this domain.

The implementation of the Macolin Convention as the only international legally binding framework to combating the manipulation of sports competitions it is certainly one of the most remarkable achievements, as it provides to all actors concerned with a common legal framework for efficient international co-operation to respond more effectively to this global threat.

The perspective we have at Europol when it comes to fight all forms of corruption in sport, and particularly the manipulation of sports competitions has not changed over time. **The idea driving Europol's action** in this respect is in fact based on the fact that by investigating and disrupting the most active Organised Crime groups operating in this field which earn vast illegal profits and also launder money from other serious crimes, we help ensuring that the integrity of all affected sports is safeguarded which is our common goal.

This is possible through a dedicated **Analysis Project on Corruption** that operates within the **European Financial and Economic Crime Centre** at Europol which combines massive experience and expertise in dealing with all sort of complex (international) financial investigations, including **corruption** investigations, money laundering and asset recovery investigations. These three activities are in fact most often interlinked and should all be taken into account to enhance financial investigations connected to corruption.

And of course, we could not do this if we did not have in place effective relationship with a sectorial network of colleagues as well as with experts from other networks.

Unfortunately, the global scenario we observe at Europol by engaging in our daily operational work is that the threats posed by organised criminals continue to be out there, and **more sports are now affected** as observed in several cases supported by Europol in recent years. Professional sports matches from lower tier categories are still the bigger target for criminals, however isolated incidents of higher level competitions have been also detected. We also see that some OC groups and individual criminals that have been notoriously involved in this criminal activity at national and international level, have returned to operate with old and newer associates perhaps also due to mild sentences in prosecuted cases.

Overall, the number of cases referred to Europol on a yearly basis has increased so has increased the level of information exchanged between Europol and our MS.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent travel restrictions that we are all suffering from, have surely affected also this criminal landscape, however they have not prevented criminals from re-adjust their operating schemes in order to adapt their business models to the evolving situation. At Europol, we have in fact observed these dynamics and reported it to our stakeholders and to the wider public.

To make the landscape of this criminality even more complex and challenging we should nowadays look also at other factors and trends strictly connected to this crime area like the increasing use of internet as a business model used by organised criminals, the use of encrypted communication platforms, and other emerging trends that are also technology-driven, like for example the use of electronic money transfer services and e-Wallets or the use of unregulated crypto-currencies for the purpose of online betting. All things that make law enforcement investigations more challenging, especially **when it comes to identify the big financial flow** that is connected to this crime. From our side, we keep an eye on all these factors in order to improve the evolving intelligence picture on this crime and on the criminal networks acting behind it.

Now, if the signs and trends I have just described may appear of concern, they also clearly indicate that much more efforts are being put by public authorities and the law enforcement community than ever before to prevent, detect, investigate and prosecute

cases affecting the integrity of sports. That means for us that **we are on the good track**, and it also means that by intensifying the exchange of information and better coordinating our international cooperation efforts – as clearly foreseen in the Macolin Convention, we will be better equipped now than we were before to counter a criminal threat that is cross-border by nature.

Also, I would like to underline that sports corruption and the manipulation of sport competitions have been again pointed out as a major crime threat in one of the key strategic document produced by Europol, the Serious and Organised Threat Assessment (SOCTA) and in particular in the last SOCTA 2021, in order to enable policy making's considerations and actions.

In connection with this, I think it's also important to underline new funding opportunities that are now being made available from Europol side in the context of the **European Multi-disciplinary Platforms against Criminal Threats (EMPACT)** which is connected to the **EU Policy Cycle for organised and serious international crime 2022-2025**. This mechanism in fact allows increased funding possibilities for specific operational actions and for selected priority areas to the benefit of EU MS, also in relation **to corruption investigations**.

This is an additional element that **MS can and should** take into considerations when strengthening their operational capabilities and actions in this area.

These joint efforts will likely reflect in a better prevention, detection and sanctioning of sports manipulation as well as in increasing the law enforcements capabilities to identify and disrupt organized criminal networks active in this area.

To conclude, I would like to stress once again that Europol is fully committed to provide a continued support to its participating countries, and to continue cooperating and coordinating with all relevant stakeholders, and I believe that this conference is in fact contributing through open dialogue to address some key topics and challenges ahead in combating the manipulation of sports competitions as well as to share positive practices and progress made in order to continue advancing in our common priorities.