

# Fighting International Fugitives – Episode 14

## The Europol Podcast Season 2 Episode 6

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

There was actually at the same time numerous plans in place to murder people. So that was definitely something new for us. You know, the, the day of, you know, very simple groups and very simple methodologies are gone.

#### **Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

I think that we are the only actually agency in Europe, most likely in the whole world, which can provide this type of support. So I think that this is our strength.

#### **Europol Narrator**

Welcome to the Europol podcast, the official podcast of the EU agency for law enforcement cooperation. In this series, we shine a light on some of the biggest operations Europol has supported, and how we continue to fight crime.

Today's episode: fighting international fugitives.

### PREAMBLE

#### **Europol Narrator**

Europol serves as the hub for all kinds of international police investigations. If you've listened to previous episodes, you'll know that our crime centres cover a wide range of crime areas, from counter terrorism to cybercrime.

Behind all these crimes are high-risk individuals who pose serious risks to our societies. And these individuals can sometimes go to extraordinary lengths to avoid being arrested and put on trial.

In this episode, we'll show you what a global operational against fugitives looks like. And then, we'll show you how Europol assesses and pursues these criminal threats through our Operational Taskforces.

## INTRODUCING THE CELTIC CARTEL

### **Ambassador Claire D. Cronin, US Ambassador to Ireland**

And so today, the United States Department of State is pleased to announce a reward of up to 5 million dollars for information leading to the financial disruption of the KTCO or the arrest and convictions of its leaders. This reward is offered under the Department of State's transnational organised crime rewards program. This programme, and its sister narcotics reward programme, have helped to bring more than 75 transnational criminals and major narcotics traffickers to justice since 1986.

### **Europol Narrator**

That was the voice of US Ambassador to Ireland, Claire D. Cronin, at a press conference in Dublin in April 2022. She was announcing the latest measures international law enforcement is taking against the leaders of the Kinahan cartel, and dangerous transnational criminal organisation.

This kind of step is only taken against the most serious of criminals. At Europol, we call these people 'High Value Targets', with the three Kinahan leaders falling under this category.

So what is it that led Europol to designate the Kinahans as High Value Targets? And how come the US authorities have put such a large reward out for their arrest?

Well to find out, we have to go back to 2016, when a violent gangland feud was gripping the Irish capital.

## THE REGENCY HOTEL SHOOTING

### **Europol Narrator**

The Regency Hotel, Dublin, early 2016. A crowd has gathered for an event in the hotel's function room. It's a weigh-in for an upcoming lightweight title fight.

The two boxers are on stage, surrounded by management, sports press, and boxing fans.

Meanwhile, a silver van pulls up outside. Two drivers wait in the front, while two disguised men – one in women's clothing - get out the van.

Calmly, the pair walk into the hotel function room and wait. However, they are not normal boxing fans. After waiting a few moments, they draw their weapons and open fire.

Panic erupts as people try to flee.

Two more men get out the back of the van, dressed in uniforms belonging to the armed unit of an Garda Síochána, the Irish Police. But they are certainly not police officers – they are gunmen as well.

The two pretend officers enter the hotel lobby, masks on and weapons drawn. They go room to room, looking for their target.

Six minutes later, the four attackers are all back in the van, speeding away from the hotel.

1 person, David Byrne, is dead. Another two are injured.

## THE FIGHT AGAINST THE KINAHAN CARTEL

### **Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

So I suppose the Kinahan Organised Crime Group has been active in Ireland for a long number of years. But what really brought them to, I suppose, public prominence was the murder in February 2016 of David Byrne at the Regency Hotel here in Dublin.

### **Europol Narrator**

Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly is one of the senior figures in Irish law enforcement who is going after organised crime groups like the Kinahans.

### **Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

So my name is Justin Kelly. I'm an Assistant Commissioner at An Garda Síochána, which is the Irish National Police Force.

### **Europol Narrator**

The feud between the Kinahans and the Hutches had been underway for years before the shooting.

### **Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

So this organised criminal group, the Kinahans, I suppose became embroiled in a feud which was primarily here in Ireland, focused around Dublin. The result of that has been eight murders, and there's also been two deaths in Spain.

This is very much a personal feud between two groups. A lot of the individuals in these groups knew each other. In fact, some of them have known each other from the early childhood years in particular areas of Dublin.

**Europol Narrator**

This deadly feud and the widespread alleged criminal activities of the Kinahan Cartel meant they were High Value Targets for Europol. The organised crime group is suspected of being involved in drug trafficking, money laundering, weapons smuggling, and other forms of serious and organised crime.

The Regency Hotel Shooting showed that violence from the Hutch-Kinahan feud was spilling over onto the streets of Ireland. The Garda turned up the heat on the ringleaders; the High Value Targets.

**Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

We put considerable pressure on some of the groups here in Ireland, particularly around asset seizure and forfeiture, which is an area we're particularly strong in here. So our Criminal Assets bureau, I mean the key objective is to deprive and deny criminals of access to funds, ~~uh~~, goods, possessions.

**Europol Narrator**

Above all else, criminals are incentivised by profits – and the Garda's Criminal Assets Bureau has the job of finding and seizing criminal assets and cash.

The Bureau's efforts meant the three Kinahan leaders soon realised that they and their illicit profits weren't safe in Ireland.

So they moved to Spain.

**Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

So I suppose we had you could look at two elements to it. We had the element here in the Republic of Ireland that we had to deal with, which was very much a murderous feud that was playing out on the streets here in Ireland.

We mounted a large number of what we would call threat to life operations. So these were operations where we knew particular individuals who have been targeted to be murdered, and actual groups were put together for the purpose of this, using technology; so for example, they will put trackers on victims cars. They would have finance behind them. They would have weapons supplied, they would have people set up as spotters for murders.

**Europol Narrator**

The authorities were looking at a deadly feud of massive proportions. Europol analysts here in The Hague were supporting the Garda operations, as Irish officers on the ground worked flat out to prevent further violence.

**Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

Some of them actually in the process of on the way to murder people - or very close to doing, as people call it - possession of firearms, encrypted phones, surveillance equipment.... we now have around 80 people convicted for those type of crimes, and they're all serving sentences, some of them considerable sentences.

Europol were a really key partner for us and they supplied us with intelligence that supported those operations.

**Europol Narrator**

While the Garda invested immense human, financial and technical resources into stopping the feud in Ireland, the second component of their solution was international.

**Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

The second part was all really around international relationships and cooperation and working as a team with our colleagues abroad.

**Europol Narrator**

Key partners included the UK, Spain, Portugal, and The Netherlands.

**Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

Obviously our colleagues in Netherlands are very important because of, you know, the obviously the importation routes into the big ports there in Rotterdam and, and Antwerp.

And then I suppose overarching all that is obviously I work with Europol, which is obviously absolutely vital. And we've got permanent officers in Europol, and on top of that we would also um, second regularly people to Europol, and we've sent for particular operations people on short term basis to Europol.

**Europol Narrator**

Europol has powerful analytical and technical capabilities that support Member State investigations into High Value Targets like the Kinahans. We also have a robust data protection system – with strong checks and balances – meaning we can safely host criminal data to

support intelligence efforts. And it's all coordinated through our secure real-time communications platform, SIENA.

**Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

I suppose that intelligence sharing is just so important for us, because when you're dealing with groups like this, it can often have very dynamic situation. So it's so important that we can get that done in real time, which we can.

Europol I think was particularly significant for me I suppose is the access to, you know, databases, analytical tools are really important. The day of very simple groups and very simple methodologies are gone.

**Europol Narrator**

Europol were supporting the Garda by providing intelligence and analysis, which was helping apprehend murders with just moments to spare.

**Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

So I suppose Europol obviously brings everything together for us on a European level. And then I suppose the final piece to that is the work outside Europe. So obviously our partners and Interpol and then it was really important for us and this was our partners from the United States.

**Europol Narrator**

This is what a global operation against high value targets looks like. When this many law enforcement agencies are on your back, even the most basic parts of life can become difficult – as these high value targets were about to discover.

To recap, from 2016-2021 the Garda were conducting all kinds of sweeps in Ireland to halt violence and seize the cartel's economic assets. European countries and Europol were simultaneously conducting actions and providing criminal analysis of the network.

And in 2022, the American authorities put even more weight behind the operation.

**Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

it's really important to say the sanctions, um, you know, these are the responsibility of the United States. So this is a measure that the authorities in the United States took.

**Europol Narrator**

The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (or OFAC for short) placed sanctions on the three High Value Targets at the top of the Kinahan Cartel. Part of that package of sanctions was the 5 million dollar reward Ambassador Cronin was talking about at the start of the episode.

**Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

The real thing with sanctions is that makes it very difficult for organised crime groups, for individuals to travel. And obviously a key part for us is around money moving finances, people who set up companies.

And I mean, we know obviously companies are set up - front companies - to facilitate organised crime, to facilitate money laundering, drug trafficking. So something like OFAC sanctions make this really difficult for organised criminal groups.

**Europol Narrator**

So as well as all the police attention they were dealing with in Europe, the Kinahans now had to deal with being wanted men in the US.

That meant that – on top of the 5 million dollar reward - the sanctions blocked any property of the Kinahans within the United States financial system, and prohibited United States persons from business dealings with them. Anyone violating this rule or helping the Kinahans evade the sanctions could be jailed for up to 20 years.

## THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

**Europol Narrator**

In the years since the 2016 regency hotel shooting, the Kinahans' position has certainly changed. From murders in broad daylight in Ireland's capital, the Kinahans have been forced to live far away from home, with all kinds of barriers to international travel and business.

So where are they now?

**Assistant Commissioner Justin Kelly, An Garda Síochána**

I think it's important to know that, you know, these groups, they have many actors in them, uh, and spread across a number of countries and actually in fact a number of continents. I mean, we are going to be very patient in this and we are satisfied that the people behind these type of groups will come to justice.

I'm confident by the amount of work and cooperation that we have that that will happen. But, I just reiterate that this is a matter of being patient, but we are - I think all the people that I have working for me - I would actually probably not even describe it as patience.

I describe it as being relentless. So that is our whole focus on groups like this.

## THE ROLE OF EUROPOL

### **Europol Narrator**

So what is Europol's role in an operation like this, against dangerous international fugitives?

### **Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

Organised crime in the EU is increasing, and I'd say it's based on global networks nowadays.

### **Europol Narrator**

That's Jari Liukku, and he's based here at Europol HQ. He is one of the key players behind our work on High Value Targets such as the Kinahans.

### **Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

My name is Jari Liukku, Head of the Serious and Organised Crime Department at Europol. I started as a police officer in Finland, in 1980, and since that I've been working in different ranks in the Finnish police and then also in the judiciary as a prosecutor and judge. I started here in 2017.

### **Europol Narrator**

So what's the reason that Europol only goes after high value targets?

### **Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

This broad process was started actually 2018. We supported the Member States in establishing a standard operating procedure which is defining operational task force concept. So it's actually standardised in each step of the process, starting from the start and selection of the targets until the end of the investigations. So the idea behind this is to have really identify individuals that constitute the highest risk for internal security.



**Europol Narrator**

The targets Jari's referring to are those sitting at the top of the organised crime pyramid. Leaders of OCGs, their key facilitators, or dangerous actors in the world of cybercrime, drugs trafficking or terrorism.

**Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

Investigating high-risk organised crime is really resource demanding and therefore member states need to prioritise the investigation. So how they target different groups and individuals who are posing a risk for the internal security.

**Europol Narrator**

So how exactly is someone identified as a High Value Target? Well, it all starts when a Member State is conducting an investigation.

**Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

When they [a Member State] come across with an individual that they think might meet the criteria for the high value targets, they can make a proposal to Europol and we conduct an analysis based on the information that they are providing while proposing the target. And of course we use the already existing information which is in Europol databases to assess whether the criminal activity of the individual is really meeting the criteria.

**Europol Narrator**

This procedure applies for all of the crime areas Europol covers.

**Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

It doesn't have to be in organised crime. It can be terrorist activity, it can be cybercrime, economic and financial crime. I suppose starts from there. We make the assessment. Then we organise an operational meeting together with the countries which are Member States, [and] third countries - because the high value target, and its criminal activities... his criminal or her criminal activities... need to affect two or more member state so that we have a mandate to do this.

So we organise a meeting together with the countries participating, and then we go through the results of Europol's assessment. And then if the conclusion is that these individuals or this individual is meeting the criteria so he or she can be selected as a high value threat.

**Europol Narrator**

These criteria relate to things such as the scale of the threat posed, the importance of the individual, the number of countries involved, and measures like that.

**Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

And then if such individuals are identified, then a task force or operational task force will be established. An Operational Task Force is a temporary group of investigators from member states and third countries with the support of Europol, which has a specific task to support the investigations of the criminal activities of the selected high value targets.

**Europol Narrator**

This is what led us to support operations like the Irish investigation into the Kinahans.

**Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

We were supporting them in, in providing actionable information based on the information that Europol had and then of course supporting and providing also other type of support if requested.

**Europol Narrator**

Those requests could be for on-the-ground specialists, operational meetings at our HQ, or for intelligence, analysis, and access to Europol's technological capacities.

**Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

And of course we are more than happy to continue this type of work and look forward to information from the Irish colleagues.

**Europol Narrator**

As well as the Kinahan case, Jari has been involved in investigations concerning dozens upon dozens of high value targets. All these investigations are handled by those Operational Taskforces, or OTFs.

**Europol Narrator**

There is more to the High Value Target approach than just going after the head of a criminal group. Like the rest of society, organised crime has gone digital. This means their networks are harder to penetrate and they can act more rapidly than decades ago.

But there's another result of this digitisation you might not have thought of; criminals are now more closely connected, and they cooperate.

Videoconferencing and the online world allows people like you and me to find each other online and collaborate as never before. The same goes for criminals.

**Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

So that's why because of this increasing trend of global connections, the Member States actually, with the support of Europol, decided that we need to do something, how to identify the individuals, and then through the individuals that groups and networks which are posing the highest risk for the EU Member States' internal security.

**Europol Narrator**

A good example of criminal joint ventures, and the importance of going after High Value Targets, comes from the world of drug trafficking.

**Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

The cornerstone for the high risk organised crime groups in the EU is mainly drug trafficking. Currently it's mainly cocaine trafficking, which is really a productive crime area for the crime groups.

And then, of course, while doing this trafficking drugs and the other crime areas which are linked to the activities of these groups of, of course, violence, extensive violence that we see increasing violence. Just yesterday, we had a drugs program board meeting and all the member states who are part of this board actually confirmed that there was an increasing trend of violence linked to organised crime, specifically drug stopping activities, and then, of course, corruption, money laundering activities.

And then weapons and explosives trafficking, those are the key elements of the high risk organised crime group activities. And therefore, of course, it's logical because they are global organised crime groups.

**Europol Narrator**

This is the phenomenon that makes High Value Targets especially important. Using Jari's example of drug trafficking, there's a whole range of crimes that come with it. Drug trafficking brings violence, corruption, money laundering, and the trafficking of firearms and explosives; the means of criminals enforcing their will on others. The key facilitators or leaders can be part of many illicit schemes at the same time – meaning the arrest of one High Value Target could bring multiple criminal operations down. For example, one money launderer could be working for multiple people smuggling networks.

Criminals' collaboration extends beyond providing each other services. Let's stick with cocaine as an example – production is on the rise once again. Here criminals even collaborate on the shipments. The sheer volume of cocaine produced is so high, that perhaps several organised crime networks will chip in on the same shipment.

#### **Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

Well, this is why they share the risk. Because if 7.7 tonnes of cocaine is seized, of course it's a financial loss. But if you have many crooks which are sharing the risk, then of course the impacts are not that high on single or groups or networks. So, this is of course something that they are doing like any business activity because this is a business activity after all, for these criminals.

#### **Europol Narrator**

The same goes for other areas of crime too. Cybercrime-as-a-service, in areas such as ransomware, means that criminals operate in a marketplace of services, buying or selling their wares to be used as part of various criminal schemes. Terrorist groups, even those with entirely opposing ideologies, are engaging online to swap propaganda techniques, toolkits for homemade weapons, and literature.

How do we know all this collaboration is happening? We know because Europol sits at the heart of the EU's internal security architecture. Investigations here and in Member States are feeding criminal data into our systems. We also had major breakthroughs with our investigations into encrypted criminal communication platforms such as Sky ECC and Encrochat. Not to forget the American-Australian led ANOM sting, Operation Greenlight, which we covered in series 1.

All this information allows us to maintain a picture of the organised crime landscape in the EU, and enables us to zero in on the relevant targets. As our Executive Director, Catherine De Bolle, said in a press conference a while ago, it was like we were in the room with all the organised criminals and the light had been switched on.

#### **Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

There were altogether 8000 investigations initiated based on the Encrochat, the SKY ECC investigations, and the platforms. Last year we supported 2 700 investigations in total - Europol. So, of course, all these big operations are producing a lot of information.

**Europol Narrator**

But this is only one segment of the work in this area. Possibly more important is the every day use of Europol systems by police in countries across the EU.

**Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

It's not only these encrypted communication platforms. the focus is on the basic investigations that the Member States, when having cross-border crimes, they should use our services. So then the more we have information concerning real time investigation, the better possibilities we have to support the Member States.

**Europol Narrator**

It is in fact a lot of this everyday policework, happening in every EU Member State, that makes the High Value Target approach possible. Because, thanks to cooperation between countries, a small piece of seemingly insignificant information can bring us fresh leads in a case.

This pays off in all kinds of ways. As well as showing how criminal methods are changing and being adapted in different jurisdictions, a breakthrough in one country's operation can – via Europol's information systems – lead to breakthroughs in other investigations conducted by other countries.

**Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

We have these good success stories, no doubt about it. But in the end the basic work is the one which makes the difference. If the quality is there, then we have better possibilities, and it's the responsibility of each police officer, a law enforcement operative who is dealing with the cross-border investigations on a daily basis to use these services. So then we will be able to dismantle these groups together.

**Europol Narrator**

And now, with Europol marking 25 years of operations in 2024, we have been able to extend our services to many countries and partners.

**Jari Liukku, Serious and Organised Crime Centre, Europol**

We are exceptional organisation globally because we are combining well, we have 51 actually countries at the moment who are using our systems. So you can imagine that if all those 51 countries are actively using our systems when investigating a serious and organised crime. So of course it creates a huge amount of valuable information which will be then made available to those countries which are investigating these cross-border crimes.

**Europol Narrator**

Since that interview with Jari, we continue to engage with more law enforcement agencies from different countries in Europe and overseas. After all, if criminal networks are working together to harm society and evade justice, it only makes sense that law enforcement works together to stop them.

**SIGNING OFF****Europol Narrator**

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Europol Podcast. Be sure to subscribe and give us a rating on whatever podcast platform you're using. And please consider sharing the podcast on your social media, it really helps us spread the word about our work in the fight against organised crime.

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