

CRACKING DOWN ON CARTELS – EPISODE 12

SEASON 2, EPISODE 2

INTRODUCTION

Robert, Europol

In this case, from the very beginning, at least three Member states affected. So for us by default it's a priority investigation.

Anton, DEA

They were very opportunistic, looking for any opportunity to co-opt someone, to help them in their international drug smuggling scheme.

Robert, Europol

This was a unique example, and this was the kind of pioneer project to, to the future OTFs that we are having now.

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: Cracking down on cartels.

THE CASE BEGINS

Europol Narrator

It's spring 2018. A plane is preparing to take off from an airport in Paraguay. The small jet, chartered by a private company, is filling up with luggage. Colourful suitcases of all shapes and sizes are loaded into the hold.

However, there are only a few people boarding. In fact, it's just the two pilots. Turns out, this is no ordinary charter flight.

Among the swimsuits and holiday books, each suitcase is filled with vast quantities of pure cocaine. Hundreds of kilograms, direct from the manufacturer, is about to take off for Europe.

Once in Europe, it will be cut with harmful chemicals and other illegal drugs, before being sold on criminal markets to users throughout the continent.

The profits are reinvested into other criminal activities, and a lavish lifestyle for the traffickers.

As well as buyers in Europe, the criminals are sending cocaine to Asia and Australia too.

This criminal network are clearly enjoying massive international reach. However, today's law enforcement – when we work together – can reach even further.

This is the story of how Europol and our partners took the fight to the traffickers, and grounded their cocaine operation.

THE FIRST INTELLIGENCE COMES IN

Robert, Europol

It was in the in the bags, like a luggage compartment. So when they were offloading, it looked like they were offloading luggage from the compartment. But yeah, 50 bags, it's a bit strange and only two pilots. And if I remember well, a stewardess as well.

Europol Narrator

This is Robert, a senior agent in the world of drugs and organised crime.

Robert, Europol

My name is Robert and I am in the past seven years working as a head of the team in the EU Drugs Unit at Europol. However, since the 2003, I've been involved in the countering of trafficking of narcotics across the EU and beyond.

Europol Narrator

Robert is a veteran when it comes to fighting organised crime groups – also known as OCGs – who deal in big quantities of drugs. Today's case was codenamed Operation Familia. And it began in the country that invented fingerprint identification – the intelligence came from Croatia.

Robert, Europol

The operation started by us, the drugs unit at Europol in early 2018. Why? The first intelligence received from Croatia.

Europol Narrator

Europol is the hub for police cooperation. And through our networks, the information from Croatia percolated across the EU. This allows other law enforcement in affected countries –perhaps also investigating the same OCG, or struggling with the damage they are causing – to come on board.

Robert, Europol

It was a spring of 2018, after receiving the first intelligence. Uh, we obviously assess the importance of the information we get on call with our Croatian investigators, they explain us a bit more on about the background of the activities and ongoing situation in Croatia.

Europol Narrator

So what is Robert screening for when he gets this kind of information from an EU Member State?

Robert, Europol

The quality of the information, the how concrete and how imminent potentially importation of cocaine is, modus operandi of the group that is utilising. At the time, Croatia was active in EU surveillance in cross-border activity, so the suspects in Slovenia, Serbia and Czech Republic, we got interested and we started supporting.

Obviously for us is super important to know that at least two Member States are affected, in this case from the very beginning, at least three Member states affected, so, for us by default, is a priority investigation.

Europol Narrator

High quality of information enables high quality criminal analysis, this is essential, both for operations but also for data protection reasons as well.

The data from Croatia contained important information on the novel modus operandi of this OCG. On top of shipments to Asia in maritime containers, the OCG were chartering private jets for their shipments to Europe.

Robert, Europol

So basically what was for us the most important information that we received, from the Croatian and other Member States actively investigating the criminal organisation, was the fact that the group was using utilising private jets.

So we got very interested in investigating these elements and this way of trafficking of cocaine from the source countries, uh, to European Union.

Europol Narrator

While the rest of us enjoy budget air travel, this group is flying drugs first-class. Operation Familia is officially on. The job now is to start looking into the criminal network – who are they, and where are they?

Robert, Europol

They were able to use the private jets. They were owned by the OCG. But what we learned and what was our surprise indeed at that point, it was a long time ago. You see now how the criminality is globally expanding. We learned that this specific group was also operating in Asia and Australia.

So for us, seeing that they are at the same time capable to commit the crime in Europe, source the cocaine from the South America source countries, and at the same time coordinate separate cells deployed in Hong Kong, Macao, Malaysia was a big story for us.

Europol Narrator

This kind of transnational scale is rare for OCGs. However, Europol's analysis put it in no doubt – this European OCG were very well-connected indeed.

Robert, Europol

They were having the contacts, they were having their groups, their people deployed in those countries. And these groups were not, of course, working on the same modus operandi, but they were engaged in retrieving the cocaine that was delivered from the big maritime vessels in front of the ports of Hong Kong and Macao.

And for us and for Asian law enforcements. This was super discovery because it was a kind of a first footprint and confirmation that the Balkan criminality is really expanding globally.

Europol Narrator

With the intelligence verified, you might be thinking that it's time to start looking for the next chartered flight and break up this supply route. But there are some important reasons why that might not be the best move, if you're serious about taking an OCG out of action. After all, this wouldn't stop their supplier, so the OCG might try and find another route and resume operations.

Then there's the matter of pinning charges on the leaders of the OCG. If you can't directly link them with the shipment, they may be able to evade justice. And at Europol, we go after the High Value Targets.

Robert, Europol

It's very difficult to connect all the dots, connect all different pieces of puzzle. And sometimes if you are successful in intercepting the plane, it's very difficult for you to prove that this specific shipment or plane was coordinated from the head of the organisation that is sitting, I don't know, in one country very far from the delivery point or for the loading point.

Europol Narrator

So instead, Robert's team at Europol HQ needed to build up a detailed picture of the organisation. Croatia had found the modus operandi, with the jet shipments in Europe and maritime shipments in Asia and Australia. But who was behind all this?

Robert, Europol

So basically that at that time, 2018, 2019. Uh, obviously we were aware that the cartel was using encrypted platforms where it was encrypted telephones, and that moment we were not able to... to monitor this activities. So you were relying on the conventional police methods like a surveillance telephone interceptions and the powerful tool, which is the international cooperation, I would say, and cross-border coordination.

Europol Narrator

With our partners, Europol was closing in on the people behind the private jets.

Robert, Europol

Let's say a month or two. Uh, it requires to have uh two or three operational meetings with the countries just to debrief on the intelligence and just to make the kind of cohesion between the groups and to make a team, international team, once everybody was on board and clear with their strategies.

Europol Narrator

Operational meetings – that's when the law enforcement authorities, representing multiple countries, get together at Europol and speak face-to-face about how they can plan an operation against an OCG.

Robert, Europol

It took us a bit two months from the first information, couple of meetings, in the meantime, just the coordination and the fine tuning of the strategy, and then the rest was just adding the new countries that needed to be added in the chat.

Europol Narrator

One of the countries who joined Operation Familia was the United States of America.

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT THE OCG

Anton, DEA

The investigation were mostly focused on the drug trafficking and money laundering, mostly the drug trafficking.

Europol Narrator

The US Drug Enforcement Administration has offices around the world, with country agents, such as Anton, who worked at the DEA office in Croatia. His role was to support investigations into drug trafficking OCGs.

Anton, DEA

My name is Anton. I'm a retired special agent with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

Europol Narrator

The OCG in this episode, which Anton describes as a 'Balkan cartel', has unique characteristics. Born out of the former Yugoslavia, and with the diaspora all over the world, there are connections that this organised criminal group were trying to exploit.

Anton, DEA

Of course, this is actually a really good example of the scale, both in volume and also in geography and how ambitious they are. In this operation we found that this collection of Serb Montenegrin and Croatian targets were working with Czech pilots, of private aircraft to fly to South America, to receive hundreds of kilograms at a time of cocaine from South American targets.

At the same time, other cells within this wide organisation were coordinating maritime shipments - we believe, on commercial cargo vessels - to Hong Kong. And doing at-sea drop offs, of hundreds of kilograms of cocaine, and then sending their own members to Hong Kong, to wear diving suits and go and retrieve this cocaine, working with customers based in Australia and Chinese triads.

Europol Narrator

As Anton explains, this OCG had people everywhere. This is what enabled such a big operation – the group members were embedded worldwide. Plus, they had an early-mover advantage when it comes to today's shipping routes.

Anton, DEA

If you look along the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, lots of islands, you know, centuries and centuries of seagoing tradition.

Europol Narrator

So this is partially why the OCG were able to have such a global operation. As we've discussed in previous episodes, cartels have deep pockets when it comes to bribery.

The criminals were also being opportunistic whenever they could, such as by constantly recruiting different pilots to fly their planes to avoid suspicion.

Earlier in the episode, Robert described international cooperation as a 'powerful tool'. This is how that looks in practice.

Anton, DEA

We collect as much information as we can get, say from Croatian National Police or Serbian police. And then we see if we can add to that, with our own very extensive global criminal information base. For example, many a time it's been, we're all here of a name like, say, our Serbian counterparts, and then I'll find out through our own intelligence in DEA that that individual was already being investigated two years ago in Peru.

And I could find out before case file what happened in Peru, who that person was working with, what

activities they were involved with. And I can then feed that back to our counterparts in Serbia. And that really speaks to the DEA's role, particularly in Europe here. Here is you already have this great criminal and police intelligence sharing network of Europol, which is a phenomenal model.

Europol Narrator

The DEA is a crucial partner for lots of law enforcement agencies worldwide. They have several special capabilities that help Europol – and our partners – get investigations moving quickly.

Anton, DEA

In many cases, we have vetted investigative units. Those are national police officers that we have screened, we train and we resource, and they work on investigations with us. So we're able to do things like conduct physical surveillance, pull down video, and do wiretapping.

Europol Narrator

In Operation Familia, these assets were deployed to their fullest extent.

Anton, DEA

Principally, as I recall, in Operation Familia, it was really more about can we get boots on the ground, in Hong Kong, in Uruguay, in Paraguay; to conduct service physical surveillance, conduct interdictions, to attempt to or encourage the use of search warrants or arrest warrants, maybe wiretapping those sort of activities.

Europol Narrator

This would soon pay off. The network of contacts had been uncovered thanks to the DEA and several EU Member States, who were prompting the respective competent law enforcements to do the investigations on the ground. But for this level of criminal investigation, you need more than that before you swoop in, and take down the perpetrators.

Anton, DEA

There are a few things you need to consider. First of all, before planning any action day, you have to have a prosecutor in some country, who has already agreed to charge your main defendants, and you have to conflict if there are multiple countries whose prosecution services want to be charging the same individuals, they have to have that conversation and straighten that out. Now, if you get some criminal intelligence, and you act really quickly upon that, maybe that's not such an issue. But if you're

doing an operation like Familia, which will last for months and months, involve many different countries, then that's not a snap decision to say, oh, today we're, going to go jump on this.

Europol Narrator

The criminals were carrying on with business as usual all the while. But now law enforcement were handling those final preparations that Anton just described.

Operational meetings were taking place at Europol HQ, here in The Hague. What Robert and the Member States needed next, was a way to follow the shipments, so they could identify when would be the right time to strike.

LAW ENFORCEMENT TAKES ACTION AGAINST THE CARTEL**Robert, Europol**

So basically the key real coordinate, real time coordination was thanks to the setup of the virtual command post. During this period, all the countries were aware of the developments, intelligence sharing, cross-border activities and the needs.

Europol Narrator

A virtual command post, or a VCP, is a tool Europol deploys for big operational actions. It's essentially a collection of technology assets that gives all participating agencies on the ground access to the heart of the operation. That's the data, the communication, everything. And the agencies were communicating via Europol's secure information exchange network application - SIENA.

What the countries eventually agreed was a two-phase action. Phase one would see them make a big seizure of drugs, and the second phase would see the suspected members of the OCG, based in several countries, being arrested simultaneously.

Robert, Europol

And when the moment came that there has to be a decision to intercept the plane, to make a seizure, to do the arrest, to make a major takedown of the group across the various countries.

Europol Narrator

Experts in the French Gendarmerie brought in the technical capacity to track the jets owned by the criminals. France had also brought in a prosecutor, ready to handle the legal side of things. All Robert, Anton, and the rest of the agents had to do was wait for the right moment.

Robert, Europol

But there is this energy, this drive that is that is pushing you forward that you are really trying to investigate, what is happening with the countries together, work in this international community. And it was fascinating really, that all the community in this case, all the countries that were participating, were able to track the plane from the starting point in Europe, cross the Atlantic, stop over surveillance after surveillance was set up as the plane was moving.

Even with the source countries and with US colleagues, they were quite capable to see, what is happening in Paraguay, in Asunción, where the plane was loaded. And this was fantastic. Then to know and to make a decision. Okay, it's loaded; there is no question we need to act against it.

You know, in Europe, when it rich and fantastic surveillance of the French Gendarmerie and the French colleagues, which was really like you are watching a movie so, I mean, there is this moment where these you have the boost of adrenaline, and this this makes you to work against in this type of investigations.

Europol Narrator

The plane was in the sky. No passengers, but lots of hard drugs. Their plan was to fly to Basel, which sits on the French-Swiss border, and then use the EU's free movement rules to get the drugs to various distributors unchecked. Little did they know, French observers saw their planned destination and prepared to intercept.

Robert, Europol

It was uh, the first was the interception of the shipment and the first phase of the action day, which happened in the France and Switzerland, because obviously there was the main seizure that took place in Europe. And this occasion the investigators were deployed, uh, to those countries to assist the all the process.

Europol Narrator

The team of investigators also were homing in on the high value target behind the criminal network. Rather than being holed up somewhere far from the drug trafficking action, the OCG's leader had decided to pick up this shipment themselves – in person.

Robert, Europol

And everybody was surprised. Everybody was surprised, because he didn't take the bags, but he was there waiting that the pilots bring the drugs. The main suspect came to pick up the shipment together with the associate, so he was arrested.

However, the rest of the group kept a low profile, kept their ongoing activities. They stepped back a bit. They reassess what is happening, but they were obviously under control of the law enforcement. And when the decision was taken to take down everybody, it was one coordinated action.

Europol Narrator

This is where phase two of the action kicks off.

Robert, Europol

After the overall takedown of the criminal organisation took place as well in Czech Republic, in Croatia, in Serbia, and in parallel activities were taken in Hong Kong and Macao.

Europol Narrator

Police forces in three continents make a round of lightning-fast actions. A separate set of arrests and seizures were being made by police in Asia, while here in Europe, the jig was up for the criminal group.

In total, 16 members were arrested – 5 in Asia and 11 in Europe. Officers pulled more than 600 kilos of cocaine from the plane in Basel, while our Hong Kong counterparts pulled another 400 kg, making a whole tonne of seized cocaine in total.

And before you think the criminals were going to enjoy their profits: a total of over 2 million euros in cash, and a further million's worth of luxury goods – like fancy watches and fast cars – were seized.

And the police work didn't end there. Here's Anton on what we did next:

Anton, DEA

Well, usually cocaine packaged in kilograms size packages has certain markets, and DEA and other institutions - I think Europol has a similar system - of tracking historically what markings were used and which shipments, in which places, on which dates.

And from that we try to make attribution and say, okay, we know that this scorpion logo was seen five times in Europe in the last year and four of those times we know from the investigations it was tied to Group X. Well, this may help suggest that possibly the seizure you're looking at now may be tied to group or supplier X.

So we would run through those databases. Perhaps combined with human intelligence that is informants or undercover, wiretap activity, electronic exploitation of devices that you seize, taken together, it, help you understand, fill in the blanks did you didn't know.

Europol Narrator

And those blanks we're filling in? They are the building blocks of the next investigation. With each investigation, we follow the lessons learned from Familia.

As Robert explains, the virtual command post and real time information sharing now sit at the heart of every operation we do.

Robert, Europol

Key takeout's of the operation Familia, was the successful set up of the real time coordination platform, which served the four coordinating in the real time activities of multiple partners, in case partners in this operation. So since then, we saw as a successful formula for tackling and coordinating life activities, for law enforcement and tackling the criminal activities in the field.

So as of that moment, we are trying to implement in every major operation that Europol is supporting, providing our service and providing our virtual command post to the to the partners, so the field.

WRAPPING UP**Europol Narrator**

Thank you very much for listening, we hope you enjoyed this episode of The Europol Podcast. Be sure to subscribe, rate and review the show on whatever podcast platform you're using, and get in touch with us via the Europol website if you have comments – we'd love to hear what you think of the show.