

Beat: News

Networks trafficking cocaine into Europe

KOMPANIA BELLO criminal group

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USPA NEWS - Joint investigation team leads to dismantling one of Europe's most active Albanian-speaking networks trafficking cocaine into Europe

A 5-year long investigation led by Italy culminated this week in 20 arrests and pre-trial detentions throughout Europe

An unprecedented international operation involving judicial and law enforcement authorities in 10 countries has resulted in the complete takedown of the Albanian-speaking "KOMPANIA BELLO" criminal group, one of the most active cocaine-trafficking networks in Europe.

In the early hours of 15 September, hundreds of police officers, including special intervention teams in close cooperation with prosecutors and investigative officers, and with the support of Europol and Eurojust, carried out coordinated raids against the members of this highly professional criminal syndicate.

As a result of this joint action, 20 individuals were arrested in Italy (5), the Netherlands (2), Germany (2), Greece (2), Romania (1), Hungary (1), Spain (1), Albania (5) and Dubai (1). The suspects have been placed in pre-trial detention for international narcotic substances trafficking, illegal possession and distribution of drugs and brutal assaults, including murder. These arrests follow those of 84 other members of this criminal group early on in the investigation in Italy, Ecuador, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Germany.

This international sweep follows a complex 5-year long investigation led by the Italian State Police (Polizia di Stato) under the direction of the Public Prosecutor's Office of Florence (Procura della Repubblica di Firenze). It is considered the biggest of its kind ever against Albanian-speaking organised crime and is the result of a Joint Investigation Team with the participation of Italy and The Netherlands, in which the parties have worked closely together for five years. Close to 4 tonnes of cocaine and over €5.5 million in cash were seized over the course of this investigation.

A sophisticated business model

For years, international importers of cocaine worked separately from the wholesalers and the gangs distributing the drug on the streets. In this case, the Albanian-speaking network under investigation ditched the entire model and controlled the whole chain "from arranging huge shipments directly from South America to distribution all across Europe.

Using sophisticated encrypted communication means, the organisation's ringleader "a 40-year old Albanian based in Ecuador" negotiated directly with the South American drug cartels, arranged huge shipments of cocaine to the major ports of Europe and, with the help of accomplices based in Italy, the Netherlands and Albania, organised distribution throughout Europe. The cocaine was smuggled across European borders concealed in vehicles equipped with sophisticated hidden compartments.

The criminals laundered their proceeds using an underground alternative remittance system of Chinese origin, known as the fei ch'ien system. Much like the Islamic hawala transfer system, people using the fei ch'ien deposit a sum in a network "agency" in one country. Another operator withdraws the equivalent amount elsewhere in the world and passes it on to the intended recipient. Leaving not a trace of tell-tale evidence for law enforcement investigators, the network is believed to have laundered millions of euro through this system.

A joint strategy to target the whole chain

Operation LOS BLANCOS, coordinated at the international level by Europol and Eurojust, was the culmination of many months of meticulous planning between law enforcement and judicial authorities in preparation for the action.

Initiated by the Italian State Police in 2015, under the direction of the Public Prosecutor's Office of Florence (Procura della Repubblica di Firenze), a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) was set up between Italy and the Netherlands with the assistance and financing of Eurojust and Europol. The partners in the JIT have since worked closely together to reveal the actual magnitude and complexity of the criminal activity of the KOMPANIA BELLO gang, to establish a joint strategy and to organise the intensive exchange of information and evidence needed to prepare for the final phase of the investigation.

All through the action day, smooth and effective cooperation took place at many European border crossings. A joint Operational Command Room was set up at Europol's headquarters to coordinate the different actions taking place simultaneously across all the countries involved. A Europol expert was also deployed to Florence to provide appropriate operational support to the Italian authorities, ensuring swift analysis of new data as it was being collected during the action and adjusting the strategy as required. Judicial coordination was provided from a coordination centre at Eurojust, with the real-time involvement of prosecutors and investigative judges for execution and adaptation of the mutual legal assistance requests needed to carry out the cross-border actions.

The following authorities took part in this investigation:

- Italy: The Public Prosecutor's Office of Florence (Procura della Repubblica di Firenze), the State Police (Polizia di Stato),
- The Netherlands: Public Prosecutor's Office Amsterdam (OM Amsterdam), Financial and Economic crime unit Amsterdam (Finec), National Police (Politie)
- Greece: Hellenic Police (Ελληνική Αστυνομία)
- Hungary: National Police, Bács-Kiskun County Police Headquarters (Bács-Kiskun Megyei Rendőr-főkapitányság) and Chief Prosecution Office of Bács-Kiskun County (Bács-Kiskun Megyei Főügyészség)
- Romania: Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime and Terrorism (DIICOT), Prosecutor's Office attached to the Iasi Court of Appeal (Parchetul de pe langa Curtea de Apel Iasi), Iasi Brigade for Countering Organized Crime (BCCO Iasi), Iasi County Police Criminal Investigations Department (IPJ Iasi - SIC)

- Germany: Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt), Public Prosecutor's Offices Lübeck, Duisburg, Mönchengladbach and Berlin, State Criminal Police Office (Landeskriminalamt) of Schleswig Holstein, Bavaria, North-Rhine Westphalia and Berlin.
- Spain: National Police (Policía Nacional), Investigate Court number 6 in Valencia and Public Prosecution Office Valencia (Fiscalía Superior de la Comunidad Valenciana)
- United Kingdom: National Crime Agency
- Albania: State Police (Policia e Shtetit)
- Emirate of Dubai: Dubai Police Force (القوة الامنية بدبي)

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