

## The European Agency's 25 years

### 1. Introduction by Raffaele Grassi\*

This year Europol celebrates its 25th anniversary, a quarter-century crucially important for police cooperation in the European Union and beyond, considering the Agency's many partnership agreements currently in place.

Set up in the early '90s as a small European anti-drugs unit, over time Europol has constantly evolved, developing into the current structure of a Union's Agency, with over 1,700 employees and about 300 liaison officers working towards a shared goal: protecting Europe from organised crime, terrorism and, more generally, from all forms of illegality affecting a common interest covered by a Union policy.

Europol history is one of constant adaptation and transformation in a constantly evolving scenario, with forms of crime increasingly capable of using the most advanced technologies for their own purposes and of infiltrating economic and social fabrics to take advantage of them. In response, the Agency has aimed at providing Member States with tools that are increasingly tailored to growing and changing operational needs, with Italy always actively participating and at the forefront of these efforts, providing its great wealth of knowledge and highly qualified and motivated police officers.

Within the Central Criminal Police Directorate, a dedicated Division called Europol National Unit (ENU) has already been operational since 1996, serving as a natural interface between the Agency and national law enforcement agencies, also including a Liaison Office at Europol headquarters in The Hague.

At the center of the European security architecture, the Agency provides a unique variety of support services, from facilitating information exchange to crime analysis reports (both strategic and operational), including state-of-the-art technological tools and financial support to ongoing investigations.

It is in this framework that our police forces have conducted many brilliant investigative activities, often exploiting the vast potential of an extremely efficient tool: the so-called Operational Task Forces, better known as OTFs. These are temporary teams of Member States' and Europol's representatives who, based on a multinational and multidisciplinary approach, coordinate intelligence and investigations focusing on the criminal activities of one and more selected high-value targets and members of their criminal networks.

Despite being a young organisation, Europol has already achieved a lot as a European driving force, supporting Member States with more robust tools to protect their citizens, always keeping up with the times, even in the radically changed post-pandemic world. The Agency is currently involved in the well-known European recovery plan called *NextGenerationEU* which has been defined as 'a once in a lifetime chance to emerge stronger from the pandemic, transform our economies and societies, and design a Europe that works for everyone'; a plan which has also quickly emerged as a "tempting" attraction for organised crime. This is a new challenge for Europol which works and will continue to stand alongside the Union for the well-being and security of its citizens.

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### 2. From its first steps...

Twenty-five years have passed since Europol became operational on 1 July 1999. We look back at some of the most significant milestones in its history.

**1991** The first formal reference to Europol is by the Luxembourg European Council approving the establishment of a Central European Criminal Investigations Office. Member States agree on police cooperation on matters considered to be of common interest (preventing and combating terrorism, illicit drug trafficking and other serious forms of international crime), in connection with a Union-wide information exchange system within a European Police Office (Europol).

**1992** Signature of the Treaty on European Union in Maastricht on 7 February.

**1993** The Europol Drugs Unit (EDU) is established by ministerial agreement and starts its operations the following year in The Hague with the mandate to assist national police forces in criminal investigations. Its mandate is limited to combating drug trafficking.

**1995** Agreement on the Convention establishing Europol under Article K.3 of the Maastricht Treaty.

**1999** Europol becomes fully operational on 1 July, following the ratification and adoption by all Member States of the legal acts provided for in the Europol Convention. Its first Director is Jürgen Storbeck from Germany.

**2001** Signature of the first cooperation agreements with non-EU Member States (Iceland and Norway) and, the following year, with the United States.

**2009** Launch of the Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA), a network for the secure exchange of information.

**2010** Europol becomes a full EU agency, falling within the EU's competence under the Treaty of Lisbon.

**2011** Inauguration of the new Europol headquarters by her Majesty Beatrix, Queen of the Netherlands.

**2013** Opening of the European Cybercrime Centre (EC3).

**2015** Europol sets up Task Force *Fraternité* after a terrorist attack in Paris in November. The Task Force continues its work when a terrorist attack takes place in Brussels just a few months later.

**2016** On 11 May, entry into force of EU Regulation 2016/794 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol). It strengthens the Agency's mandate to effectively fight terrorism, cybercrime, and other serious and organised crime. Establishment of the European Counter-Terrorism Centre (ECTC) and of the European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC).

**2019** The Justice and Home Affairs Ministers from all EU Member States mandate Europol to set up an Innovation Lab to support the law enforcement community in this field.

**2020** Europol extends its global reach as, for the first time, Europol's agreements with third countries outnumber those with EU Member States. Europol launches the European Financial and Economic Crime Centre (EFECC).

**2022** EU Regulation 2022/991 is issued, which partially amends Regulation no. 794 of 2016. Europol launches its Digital Forensics Unit, significantly enhancing its ability to support Member States in processing and analysing digital evidence for law enforcement investigations.

**2023** The new independent monitoring and advisory function of the "Fundamental Rights Officer" is introduced to produce reports and provide advice on human and fundamental rights.

**2024** Europol appoints its first "Artificial Intelligence Officer" to steer the adoption of cutting-edge AI

technologies, ensuring they align seamlessly with the Agency's mission as well as with strong data protection safeguards.

**3. ... to date** Europol's mission is to support EU Member States in preventing and combating all serious forms of international and organised crime, cybercrime and terrorism. To achieve its objectives, Europol employs 1,700 people from 54 countries and hosts a network of more than 300 liaison officers from EU Member States, third countries and international organisations. Its headquarters are located in The Hague, The Netherlands, at Eisenhowerlaan 73, and cover more than 10,000 m<sup>2</sup>.

What is striking upon entering the building is the large amount of light flooding into the four towers that form its premises. Glass has been used extensively here, and the absence of walls and fences, despite being one of the safest places in Europe, helps to harmonise the building with its surroundings: we are in t

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