

LEGAL COMMENTARIES

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The Role of the EPPO in Combating Crime in the Cultural Sector: The Case of the Regional Museum in Olomouc

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Abstract: This article addresses the role of the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) in investigating, prosecuting, and bringing to judgment the perpetrators of, and accomplices to, criminal offences affecting the financial interests of the European Union (EU) in the cultural sector. While focusing on the case of the subsidy and procurement fraud, passive corruption, and money laundering in the case of the Regional Museum in Olomouc (Czech Republic), the article aims to elucidate the current mandate and expectations with respect to the EPPO in relation to the prosecution of cultural heritage crimes. Accordingly, it recalls the key objectives of the EU Action Plan against Trafficking in Cultural Goods, and considers the potential contribution of the EPPO to the safeguarding of cultural heritage from the threats connected with organized, transnational criminal activities.

Keywords: European Union, EPPO, Czech Republic, fraud, trafficking of cultural property

General Background

The European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) began operations on 1 June 2021 as an independent body of the European Union (EU) with a juridical personality. It was established under the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)¹ between 22 EU Member States via enhanced cooperation procedure.² Currently, 24 of the 27 Member States take part in this enhanced cooperation.³ According to Council Regulation (EU) 2017/1939 (hereinafter "EPPO Regulation"), the EPPO is "responsible for investigating, prosecuting and bringing to judgment the perpetrators of, and accomplices to, criminal offences affecting the financial interests of the Union",⁴ as defined and provided for in Directive (EU) 2017/1371 (the so-called "PIF Directive").⁵ In general, it investigates and prosecutes fraud against the EU and other crimes against the EU's financial interests, including fraud concerning EU funds of over €10,000 and cross-border VAT fraud cases involving damages above €10 million. It undertakes investigations and carries out acts

¹ Article 86; consolidated version: OJ C 202, 7.6.2016, p. 47.

² See Title III TFEU, and Article 20 of the Treaty on the European Union, consolidated version: OJ C 202, 7.6.2016, p. 13.

³ Except Denmark, Hungary, and Ireland.

⁴ Council Regulation (EU) 2017/1939 of 12 October 2017 implementing enhanced cooperation on the establishment of the European Public Prosecutor's Office ('the EPPO'), OJ L 283, 31.10.2017, p. 1.

⁵ Directive (EU) 2017/1371 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2017 on the fight against fraud to the Union's financial interests by means of criminal law, OJ L 198, 28.7.2017, p. 29.

of prosecution and exercises “the functions of prosecutor in the competent courts of the Member States, until the case has been finally disposed of”.⁶

Despite its relatively brief operational history, the EPPO has already initiated a significant number of successful legal proceedings in a range of areas pertaining to the economic and social life of the EU Member States. To date however only a limited number of cases have been related to the cultural sector. In fact, the EPPO does not have a specific mandate to protect cultural heritage. The EPPO’s investigations and prosecutions have thus only concerned instances of fraudulent misappropriation and misuse of public funds, including EU funds, for culture- and heritage-related activities. Such cases have involved the misappropriation of funds earmarked for the conservation of movable cultural assets (as evidenced by the case of the conservation of Orthodox icons in Romania),⁷ as well as immovable monuments (as exemplified by the case of the conservation of a historic church in Bulgaria),⁸ and historical sites (as illustrated by the conservation work in the historic centre of Sofia in Bulgaria).⁹ Additionally, there have been cases related to the misappropriation of funds for heritage research (Zagreb, Croatia)¹⁰ and the organization of heritage exhibitions. The latter case concerns the Regional Museum in Olomouc (Czech Republic) which, due to the globally recognized cultural value of the city and successful outcome of the EPPO’s proceedings, will be discussed in more detail in this commentary.

While focusing on the Olomouc case, this article seeks to elucidate the current mandate and discuss the expectations towards the EPPO in relation to the prosecution of cultural heritage crimes. Accordingly, it recalls the key objectives of the EU Action Plan against Trafficking in Cultural Goods (hereinafter “2022 EU Action Plan”),¹¹ and considers the potential contribution of the EPPO to the safeguarding of cultural heritage from the threats of organized, transnational criminal activities.

⁶ EPPO Regulation, Article 4.

⁷ European Public Prosecutor’s Office, *Romania: Company Specialised in Painting Icons Probed over Fraud Allegations*, 11 July 2023, <https://www.eppo.europa.eu/en/media/news/romania-company-specialised-painting-icons-probed-over-fraud-allegations> [accessed: 20.11.2024].

⁸ European Public Prosecutor’s Office, *Bulgaria: EPPO Probes into Church Restoration on Suspicion of Subsidy Fraud*, 22 November 2024, <https://www.eppo.europa.eu/en/media/news/bulgaria-eppo-probes-church-restoration-suspicion-subsidy-fraud> [accessed: 30.11.2024].

⁹ European Public Prosecutor’s Office, *Bulgaria: EPPO Probes into Corruption and Misuse of EU Funding for Restoration of Sofia’s Historic Centre*, 31 March 2023, <https://www.eppo.europa.eu/en/media/news/bulgaria-eppo-probes-corruption-and-misuse-eu-funding-restoration-sofias-historic-centre> [accessed: 30.10.2024].

¹⁰ European Public Prosecutor’s Office, *Croatia: Former Deputy Minister Arrested in Investigation Involving University of Zagreb*, 2 May 2024, <https://www.eppo.europa.eu/en/media/news/croatia-former-deputy-minister-arrested-investigation-involving-university-zagreb> [accessed: 30.10.2024]; see also European Public Prosecutor’s Office, *Croatia: 29 Suspects Arrested in Investigation Involving University of Zagreb*, 8 November 2023, <https://www.eppo.europa.eu/en/media/news/croatia-29-suspects-arrested-investigation-involving-university-zagreb> [accessed: 30.10.2024].

¹¹ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU Action Plan against Trafficking in Cultural Goods*, 13 December 2022, COM(2022) 800 final.

Financial Offences Committed at the Regional Museum in Olomouc

On 5 April 2024, the Regional Court in Ostrava approved a plea agreement,¹² submitted by managers of the Regional Museum (Vlastivědné museum; hereinafter: VMO) in Olomouc, who were accused in a case supervised by the EPPO.¹³ While the damage caused by this criminal act was rather insignificant in comparison to other financial crime offences investigated in the Czech Republic,¹⁴ it arguably represented the first real investigation conducted by the EPPO of a crime against the EU financial interests in the cultural sector.¹⁵

The investigation was led by the National Centre against Organised Crime (NCOZ), a specialized branch of the Criminal Police and Investigation Service of the Police of the Czech Republic (Služba kriminální policie a vyšetřování Policie České republiky).¹⁶ The supervising European Delegated Prosecutor (EDP) was Mr Pavel Pukovec. Three people have pleaded guilty to subsidy and procurement fraud in an investigation into the suspected manipulation of a public contract at the VMO. One of the defendants also pleaded guilty to charges of passive corruption and money laundering.

The perpetrators are a former director of the museum and two of its former employees. The accusations relate to the project called “Virtual museum in education – the use of new digital technologies in the connection of formal and informal education”, financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds within the Operational Programme for Research, Development and Education, granted by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic. The estimated damage was CZK 13.5 million (approximately €540,000).

¹² Czech Republic, Judgement of the Regional Court in Ostrava – court branch Olomouc (5 April 2024), Ref. No. 28 T 3/2024-10447.

¹³ European Public Prosecutor’s Office, *Czechia: Three Plead Guilty to Fraud Involving the National History Museum in Olomouc*, 1 February 2024, <https://www.eppo.europa.eu/en/media/news/czechia-three-plead-guilty-to-fraud-involving-national-history-museum-olomouc> [accessed: 02.10.2024]; Česká televize, *Soud schválil dohodu v kauze zakázek Vlastivědného muzea v Olomouci, potvrdil sankce a podmínky* [Court Approves Settlement in the Case of the Regional Museum in Olomouc, Confirms Sanctions and Conditions], 5 April 2024, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/regiony/soud-schvalil-dohodu-v-kauze-zakazek-vlastivedneho-muzea-v-olomouci-potvrdil-sankce-a-podminky-347855> [accessed: 02.10.2024].

¹⁴ J. Petr, *EPPO Cases in Data: Examples from Czechia on the (Problematic) Measurement of the Effectiveness of EPPO Investigations*, “eucrim” 2023, No. 4 <<https://eucrim.eu/articles/eppo-cases-in-data/>> [accessed: 09.12.2024].

¹⁵ A. Jakubowski, *EPPO’s Investigation into Corruption and Misuse of EU Funds in the Museum Sector*, 15 March 2024, <https://www.steppo-eulaw.com/2024/03/15/eppos-investigation-into-corruption-and-misuse-of-eu-funds-in-the-museum-sector/> [accessed: 12.10.2024].

¹⁶ See European Public Prosecutor’s Office, *Corruption and Manipulation of Public Contracts at Museum in Czechia*, 30 November 2024, <https://www.eppo.europa.eu/en/media/news/corruption-and-manipulation-public-contracts-museum-czechia> [accessed: 02.10.2024]; also see European Public Prosecutor’s Office, *Czechia: Three Charged in Investigation into Public Contract at the National History Museum in Olomouc*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.eppo.europa.eu/en/media/news/czechia-three-charged-investigation-public-contract-national-history-museum-olomouc> [accessed: 02.10.2024].

All three perpetrators agreed to a sentence of three years' imprisonment, suspended for five years (which is the most severe non-custodial sentence possible). In addition, they have to reimburse the remaining amount of the damage during the probation period and each has to pay a fine of CZK 500,000 (approximately €20,000). They are also banned from applying for subsidies for a period of 10 years.

While the *modus operandi* itself is not unusual, what makes the case special is the aggrieved party – a public institution protecting cultural heritage. Indeed, the gravity of the case concerns not only the scale of offences, but also the societal significance and cultural standing of the museum institution in question. The VMO itself is one of the oldest and most important Czech museums. Moreover, Olomouc's extensive Old Town is the second largest historical complex in the Czech Republic (after the centre of Prague).¹⁷ Its buildings are mainly in the Renaissance and Baroque styles. The Holy Trinity Column on the Upper Square is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.¹⁸ Equally valuable is the 19th-century city centre, which gives the city its metropolitan image, and the districts of Klášterní Hradisko and Svátý Kopeček with their Baroque monasteries. The city is also one of the most important tourist attractions in the country. The number of tourists visiting the city each year is similar to the city's population. The case has been widely reported in the media, showing that although the cultural sector represents a small part of the economies of the EU Member States, it is nevertheless a multi-billion euro sector with significant support from EU funds. It is also of key importance to the Union's societies, their cultural life, well-being, and community participation.¹⁹ In this regard, the VMO case might put a foot in the door for expansion of the EPPO's powers in the protection of cultural goods.

Trafficking in Cultural Goods as the EPPO's Competence?

Indeed, the societal implications of criminality in the cultural sector, as demonstrated in the above-mentioned case, raise the question of a possible increased role for the EPPO in investigating, prosecuting, and bringing to judgment the perpetrators of cultural heritage crimes associated with terrorism and organized crime.

In recent years, the EU has emerged as a pivotal actor in the global and regional efforts to combat trafficking in cultural goods.²⁰ In particular, this has entailed re-

¹⁷ Statutární město Olomouc, *Městská památková rezervace Olomouc (MPR Olomouc)*, https://www.olomouc.eu/o-meste/uzemni-planovani/mpr-olomouc?srsId=AfmBOoq7den5xEKwjolWqoD_CGP-PUz-44KdTSHa1N8Bft7BSX_uOQiIP [accessed: 03.10.2024].

¹⁸ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, *Holy Trinity Column in Olomouc*, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/859> [accessed: 12.10.2024].

¹⁹ See A. Jakubowski, *Participation in Cultural Heritage Governance in the EU: Foundations, Challenges and Socio-Economic Significance*, in: E. Psychogiopoulou, S. Schoenmaekers (eds.), *European Union Economic Law and Culture: Towards a European Culturally Corrected Market Economy*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham-Northampton 2024, pp. 54-65.

²⁰ See R. Mackenzie-Gray Scott, *The European Union's Approach to Trade Restrictions on Cultural Property: A Trendsetter for the Protection of Cultural Property in Other Regions?* "Santander Art and Culture Law Review" 2016, Vol. 2(2), pp. 211-236. It is important to note that for many decades, the issue of crime against cultural

sponding to the significant surge in the illicit trade in archaeological objects coming from the Mediterranean region, which has been exacerbated by the political instability, terrorism, and armed conflicts that have characterized the first two decades of the new millennium. In this context, the instruments pertaining to the control of imports of cultural goods originating from Syria and Iraq are particularly relevant. They prohibit the import, export, or dealing in the aforementioned cultural goods and other items of archaeological, historical, cultural, rare scientific, and religious importance from Iraq and Syria, respectively.²¹ These provisional instruments have now been supplemented by a comprehensive system of import controls under Regulation (EU) 2019/880.²² The objective of this system is to prevent the illicit trade in cultural goods and to prohibit the import into the Union's customs territory of cultural goods that were illicitly exported from third countries. Most recently, this legal framework has been supplemented by the "prohibition on purchasing, importing, transferring or exporting Ukrainian cultural property goods and other goods of archaeological, historical, cultural, rare scientific or religious importance, where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that the goods have been unlawfully removed from Ukraine".²³

The fight against the trafficking of cultural goods is now addressed by two EU strategies: the EU Security Union Strategy (2015-2020);²⁴ and the EU Strategy to Tackle Organized Crime for 2021-2025.²⁵ The key aim of these strategies is to enhance awareness, facilitate information exchange and cooperation (including with non-EU countries), and reinforce capacity building and expertise. Together with import regulatory and anti-money laundering instruments, they are designed to prevent tax evasion, money laundering,²⁶ and organized crime, and to contribute to

property has been a key focus of the Union's efforts in the institutionalization of criminal law. This includes the activity of the Trevi 3 working group.

²¹ See Council Regulation (EC) No 1210/2003 of 7 July 2003 concerning certain specific restrictions on economic and financial relations with Iraq and repealing Regulation (EC) No 2465/96, OJ L 169, 8.7.2003, p. 6; Council Regulation (EU) No 1332/2013 of 13 December 2013 amending Regulation (EU) No 36/2012 concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria, OJ L 335, 14.12.2013, p. 3.

²² Regulation (EU) 2019/880 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the introduction and the import of cultural goods, OJ L 151, 7.6.2019, p. 1; also see Regulation (EU) 2021/1079 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021: laying down detailed rules for implementing certain provisions of Regulation (EU) 2019/880 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the introduction and the import of cultural goods, OJ L 234, 2.7.2021, p. 67.

²³ Council Regulation (EU) 2024/1745 of 24 June 2024 amending Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine, OJ L, 2024/1745, 24.6.2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1745/oj> [accessed: 30.11.2024].

²⁴ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU Security Union Strategy*, 24 July 2020, COM(2020) 605 final.

²⁵ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU Strategy to Tackle Organised Crime 2021-2025*, 14 April 2021, COM(2021) 170 final.

²⁶ In particular, the EU's anti-money laundering regime imposes on traders, or intermediaries in art trade of certain works of art, certain obligations related to monitoring the movement of cultural goods and funds

the curbing of illicit art market practices and illicit excavations. Importantly, the EU Strategy to Tackle Organized Crime for the period 2021-2025 features the 2022 EU Action Plan, which identifies “three main illegal activities associated with trafficking in cultural goods”: (i) “theft and robbery”; (ii) “looting (the illicit removal of ancient relics from archaeological sites, buildings or monuments”); and (iii) “forgery of cultural goods”. Related crimes are: “fraud, disposal of stolen goods (fencing), smuggling, or corruption”. It also observes that “[b]eyond trafficking, criminals can abuse even legally acquired cultural goods, for money laundering, sanctions evasion, tax evasion or terrorism financing”.²⁷ To counter these threats the 2022 EU Action Plan has four strategic objectives: (i) enhancing the prevention and detection of crimes by market participants and cultural heritage institutions; (ii) reinforcing law enforcement and judicial capabilities; (iii) fostering international cooperation; and (iv) securing the support of other key stakeholders to safeguard cultural goods from criminal activity.²⁸ The 2022 EU Action Plan also advocates that the EPPO “could investigate and prosecute specific cultural goods trafficking related offenses falling within its competence. The Commission is committed to ensuring the EPPO can effectively exercise its tasks conferred by EPPO Regulation (EU) 2017/1939, including by strengthening its cooperation with non-EU countries”.²⁹

It is beyond question that the EPPO constitutes a highly significant addition to the array of instruments for law enforcement and judicial cooperation within the EU Area of Freedom, Security, and Justice (Title V TFEU); including such instruments as judicial cooperation in criminal matters and police cooperation.³⁰ While many complex investigations into heritage crimes, including those related to cross-border trafficking, are carried out in cooperation within the framework of two agencies: the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol); and the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust) – the EPPO offers a broader range of possibilities. In fact, Europol’s primary objective is to enhance the effectiveness and cooperation between the law enforcement agencies of the EU Member States through the exchange of information and intelligence, analytical support, and specialized training. Conversely, while Eurojust fosters judicial cooperation in criminal matters among agencies of EU Mem-

on the grounds of the 5th Anti-Money Laundering Directive; see Directive (EU) 2018/843 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 May 2018 amending Directive (EU) 2015/849 on the prevention of the use of the financial system for the purposes of money laundering or terrorist financing, and amending Directives 2009/138/EC and 2013/36/EU (Text with EEA relevance), OJ L 156, 19.6.2018, p. 43.

²⁷ 2022 EU Action Plan, pp. 2-3.

²⁸ Ibidem, pp. 3-16.

²⁹ Ibidem, pp. 10-11; also see *Combatting the Illicit Trade in Cultural Objects: Re-visiting the 2022 EU Action Plan against Trafficking in Cultural Goods*. Céline Chazelas-Baur Talks to Antoinette Maget Dominicé and Andrzej Jakubowski, “Santander Art and Culture Law Review” 2023, Vol. 2(9), pp. 15-21.

³⁰ See J.A.E. Vervaele, *The European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO): Introductory Remarks*, in: W. Geelhoed, L.H. Erkelens, A.W.H. Meij (eds.), *Shifting Perspectives on the European Public Prosecutor’s Office*, Asser Press, The Hague 2018, pp. 16-17.

ber States, it is not empowered to investigate or prosecute crimes.³¹ Therefore, the EPPO, which is specifically designed to investigate and prosecute cross-border crimes, appears to be an ideal fit to curb trafficking in cultural goods.³²

However, does the current EPPO mandate, under the EPPO Regulation, permit such actions? In fact, the EPPO's jurisdiction is limited to crimes directly affecting the EU's financial interests, as explicitly provided by Article 22 of the EPPO Regulation. Hence, if the destruction of cultural heritage sites or theft of cultural good causes economic harm to the Union's financial interests (e.g. through loss of tourism revenue or loss of public funds allocated for the purchase, and/or exhibition of stolen or illicitly excavated artefacts), the EPPO may be involved in assessing and prosecuting linked crimes. Yet it may also be the case that cultural heritage crimes that do not involve financial fraud or tax evasion may fall outside its scope unless other legal or financial dimensions are provable.

For these reasons several, more or less realistic, proposals for the extension of the EPPO's material competence have already been raised by the European institutions. Despite the clearly defined scope of the EPPO's material competence in Article 22 of the EPPO Regulation, the European Parliament³³ and the European Commission³⁴ have previously called for extending its powers to include organized crime and terrorism. However, in light of the current Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the plunder of Ukraine's cultural heritage,³⁵ it is now much more conceivable to expand its mandate to include overseeing the circumvention of EU sanctions, as recently called for by some members of the European Parliament.³⁶ Furthermore, this

³¹ See F. Ruggieri, *Eurojust and the European Public Prosecutor's Office: Introduction to a Historic Reform*, in: T. Rafaraci, R. Belfiore (eds.), *EU Criminal Justice: Fundamental Rights, Transnational Proceedings and the European Public Prosecutor's Office*, Springer, Cham 2019, pp. 183-187; also see A. Weyembergh, C. Brière, *Relations Between the EPPO and Eurojust – Still a Privileged Partnership?* in: W. Geelhoed, L.H. Erkelens, A.W.H. Meij (eds.), *Shifting Perspectives on the European Public Prosecutor's Office*, Asser Press, The Hague 2018, pp. 171-186.

³² See V. Ružičková, *Harmonisation of Criminal Law across the European Union and the Role of the European Public Prosecutor's Office*, "Studia Iuridica Cassoviensia" 2022, Vol. 10(1), p. 110; also see A. Jakubowski, *The Role of EPPO and Criminal Cooperation in Curbing Crimes against Cultural Heritage in the EU*, 26 November 2024, <https://www.steppo-eulaw.com/2024/11/26/the-role-of-eppo-and-criminal-cooperation-in-curb-ing-crimes-against-cultural-heritage-in-the-eu> [accessed: 30.11.2024].

³³ European Parliament, *Resolution of 25 October 2016 on the Fight against Corruption and Follow-up of the CRIM Resolution*, 2015/2110(INI).

³⁴ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the European Council. A Europe that Protects: An Initiative to Extend the Competences of the European Public Prosecutor's Office to Cross-Border Terrorist Crimes. A Contribution from the European Commission to the Leader's Meeting in Salzburg on 19-20 September 2018*, 12 September 2018, COM(2018) 641 final.

³⁵ See F. Marasi, A. Jakubowski, *The Role of EPPO in Protecting Cultural Heritage in Armed Conflict: The Case of Ukraine*, 14 November 2024, <https://www.steppo-eulaw.com/2024/11/14/the-role-of-eppo-in-protecting-cultural-heritage-in-armed-conflict-the-case-of-ukraine> [accessed: 30.11.2024].

³⁶ C. Rhawi, *Expand EPPO's Mandate to Stop Russian Oligarchs from Circumventing EU Sanctions*, 14 June 2023, "Renew Europe", <https://www.reneweuropegroup.eu/news/2023-06-14/expand-eppos-mandate-to-stop-russian-oligarchs-from-circumventing-eu-sanctions> [accessed: 10.10.2024].

would facilitate a more effective response to a broader range of threats, extending beyond the trafficking of cultural goods and financial losses of the EU and its Member States to also include those related to regional and global security.³⁷

Final Remarks

The VMO case is the key one successfully ended among EPPO's proceedings that pertain to the cultural heritage sector. The case demonstrated the importance of combating illicit activities related to the management of and access to cultural heritage, showcasing the efficacy of the EPPO. Despite the relatively limited scope of its current mandate, the EPPO can indeed make a significant contribution to the protection of cultural heritage. Arguably, such a role can be envisaged, particularly in relation to addressing cases where crimes against cultural assets intersect with financial fraud or organized crime within the EPPO's material competence. Crimes against cultural heritage, and particularly the trafficking of cultural goods, are frequently associated with financial crimes. Such offences include money laundering and tax evasion, which fall under the EPPO's mandate. To illustrate, the sale of illicitly obtained cultural goods on the black market may serve to finance organized crime or terrorism, thereby implicating EU fraud mechanisms. The smuggling of cultural goods into the EU common customs territory may involve the perpetration of VAT fraud or customs evasion in EU Member States. It is thus recommended that the EPPO engage in investigations pertaining to crimes against cultural heritage, with a view to accelerating the EU's action on cross-border cultural heritage crimes.³⁸ Such an approach would facilitate the investigation of transnational and complex financial crimes, in particular serious organized crime and money laundering, which are often linked to the illicit art trade. The prevention of money laundering and terrorist financing will only be effective if those involved in such activities are discouraged from utilizing opaque structures with the intention of concealing their financial resources. In this regard, the EPPO is not only capable of investigating and prosecuting money laundering, but also of preventing it. By increasing transparency, the EPPO may contribute to ensuring the integrity of the Union's financial system and establishing a robust deterrent.³⁹

As previously stated, a number of proposals have been put forth regarding the extension of the EPPO's mandate, which vary in terms of their realism and political feasibility. In light of the EPPO's focus on financial crimes, it can be argued that an expansion to encompass additional criminal categories (such as violent crimes or organized crime and terrorism offenses) would, in fact, serve to diminish the EPPO's

³⁷ See S. Al Shallah, *Lebanese Cultural Heritage in Conflict*, 16 November 2024, <https://www.steppo-eulaw.com/2024/11/16/lebanese-cultural-heritage-in-conflict/> [accessed: 30.11.2024].

³⁸ See F. Marasi, A. Jakubowski, *op. cit.*

³⁹ *Ibidem.*

most significant advantage and strength. In this sense, it would be more logical for the EPPO to focus its future development on investigating and prosecuting crimes related to the trafficking of cultural goods, which are more closely linked to financial and white-collar crimes. Therefore, the EU Member States, represented by the Council, should give serious consideration to extending the EPPO's mandate. Such an extension would facilitate a more integrated and complementary approach to the existing mechanisms for police and judicial cooperation in the prosecution of such crimes in the EU. However, any realistic growth of the EPPO's powers can only be considered after the office demonstrates its effectiveness in fulfilling its current mandate.

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