



# **EU NETWORK Against Corruption**

## **Second plenary meeting of the EU Network Against Corruption on 3 October 2024**

Technical Report

DG HOME with the support of Ecorys

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# Preface

The EU Network Against Corruption was established in May 2023 as part of the European Commission's anti-corruption package. It aims to develop best practices and practical guidance in various areas of common interest by bringing together all stakeholders at the EU level, including national authorities, practitioners, civil society, international organisations, researchers and EU agencies. The knowledge and good practices shared by the EU Network will support the European Commission's anti-corruption work, such as the identification of areas with high risks of corruption and a first EU anti-corruption strategy.

At the **first plenary meeting of the EU Network on 20 September 2023**, participants were introduced to the Network and engaged in interactive discussions on good practices and trends identified in the 2023 Rule of Law Report, including the fight against corruption in seaports, the use of technology to prevent and combat corruption, education and awareness raising.

**This second plenary meeting of the EU Network Against Corruption focused on**

1. providing an **update** on the work done by the European Commission on anti-corruption;
2. introducing and presenting **cross-border networks** active in the field of anti-corruption and integrity in the EU to raise awareness and stimulate synergies;
3. discussing what good **corruption risk assessment systems** look like at the national level;
4. presenting an assessment of which **areas (or sectors) are most at risk of corruption** in the EU;
5. exchanges on **fighting high-level corruption**, focusing on success stories and strategies, including civil society's role in monitoring high-level corruption cases.

# 1 Introduction

Ms. YLVA JOHANSSON, Commissioner for Home Affairs, opened this meeting with a video message in which she underlined the threat of corruption. According to a recent mapping of Europol, out of the 821 most threatening criminal networks, 70% use corruption to gain power and influence in **a vicious circle of crime and corruption**. Criminals use corruption to gain massive profits and spend this money for more corruption. If we let criminals act unhinged, **corruption can suffocate democratic societies** in Europe and **destroy democratic institutions**. The latest Eurobarometer survey on corruption shows that more than 70% of citizens across the EU said they want **Europe to play a role in upholding the rule of law**. The survey also shows that more needs to be done to tackle corruption. Almost 70% of EU citizens believe corruption is widespread in their country. When it comes to tackling corruption, there are three important assets at the EU level: 1) the **Rule of Law Report** as a force for change. Two out of three recommendations made by the European Commission are addressed by Member States in whole or in part. Member States are dedicating **more resources** to make institutions stronger to fight corruption and step up prevention, 2) the second important asset is **legislation**, the Commission proposed a **new EU law to tackle not only bribery** but also misappropriation, trading of influence, abuse of function, obstruction of justice and illicit enrichment. This Directive would give police and prosecutors the tools they need to fight corruption such as a sufficient statutes of limitation. 3) the third and most important asset is the **people involved in the fight against corruption**. The Commission proposed to set up the EU Network Against Corruption as part of the anti-corruption package in May 2023 so that everybody who is anybody in the fight against corruption in Europe to be able to **meet and exchange ideas and best practices**. A new European Commission soon will set the stage. Commissioner JOHANSSON will leave but she knows that the fight against corruption is in good hands thanks to the EU Network Against Corruption.

OLIVER RÖPKE, President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), welcomed hosting participants on the premises of the EESC. He stressed the need for a unified approach to restore public trust in institutions, highlighting the critical role that collaboration plays in achieving this goal. Röpke pointed to the complexities of public procurement as a significant challenge, calling for further advancements within the European Union to improve transparency, efficiency and integrity in procurement processes. He urged **businesses and associations to foster a culture of integrity**, noting that self-regulation is a crucial component in combating corruption. He also advocated for increased funding to support public awareness campaigns on procurement transparency, aimed at educating citizens on the importance of these issues. Reaffirming the **central role of the rule of law**, Röpke stressed its importance as one of the core principles of the European Union, with an extended focus on candidate countries. He acknowledged the EESC's mission to represent civil society at the European level and commended the EESC for its 2023 opinion on the Directive on combating corruption, which supports the proposed Directive to strengthen the anti-corruption legal framework within EU Member States. In closing, Röpke reiterated the EESC's commitment to actively **contribute to the fight against corruption** and expressed eagerness to collaborate further with all stakeholders to achieve this common goal.

The final opening remark came from Mr. FRANÇOIS VALÉRIAN, Chair of the Board of Transparency International. He opened by thanking all participants for their efforts in the area of anti-corruption. He reaffirmed Transparency International's mission to promote transparency, accountability and integrity across all sectors of society. He underscored the need for increased transparency in political finance, stricter criminal liabilities for companies involved in corrupt practices, as well as protections for corruption victims. Additionally, he advocated for longer statutes of limitations to ensure there is adequate time to effectively address corruption cases. On the directive on combating corruption, he welcomed the ambitious position of

the European Parliament but regretted less ambitious approach of EU Member States. Harmonised and robust legal frameworks are essential in advancing the fight against corruption both within the EU and beyond.

## 2 Updates from the European Commission

This session started with a presentation by the European Commission on the 2024 Rule of Law Report, the first meeting of the Anti-Corruption Partnership Forum and draft Rules of Procedure for the EU Network Against Corruption. The session was followed by a discussion involving all participants.

### 2.1 European Commission, DG HOME

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME) presented the outcomes of the fifth annual Rule of Law Report, published on 24 July 2024. This report monitors key developments and assesses the rule of law situation across all 27 Member States. Since its first publication in 2020, the Rule of Law Report has driven meaningful change: two-thirds (68%) of the 2023 recommendations have been fully or partially addressed. Over the past year, many Member States have improved their institutional frameworks to better combat corruption, including by allocating additional resources to law enforcement agencies, prosecutors and the judiciary. However, further action still is needed to strengthen preventive measures, such as rules on lobbying, conflicts of interests and asset declaration and ensuring the effective investigation and prosecution of corruption cases. These issues are reflected in the recommendations provided in the 2024 Rule of Law Report. DG HOME concluded presenting the report's results by stressing that anti-corruption and the rule of law will remain priorities in the coming year.

Additionally, an update on recent activities under the EU Network Against Corruption was provided. As part of ongoing efforts, national workshops will be organised in the coming months to follow up on the findings of the country-specific chapters in different EU member states. This initiative follows a successful pilot in 2023, conducted in six Member States (Croatia, Finland, France, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden) and will continue in 2024.

The EU also participated in the 10<sup>th</sup> Conference of States Parties to the UN Convention against Corruption. One of the key outcomes was a high-level side event, organised by the European Commission, UNODC, GRECO and the OECD, to strengthen synergies among anti-corruption mechanisms. This resulted in the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Partnership Forum, which held its first meeting in July 2024. The forum aims to improve coordination and collaboration between international organisations on anti-corruption efforts, including the coordination of review mechanisms to decrease the administrative burden for Member State authorities.

To enhance transparency, the European Commission published all relevant documents from the EU Network plenaries and workshops, including agendas, presentations on its website<sup>1</sup>. At the current plenary meeting, the Commission presented draft Rules of Procedure for the EU Network Against Corruption. The rules are open for written comments and will be agreed and adopted at some point in the future.

DG HOME also provided an update on the proposal for a Directive on combating corruption. On 14 June 2024, the Council reached a general approach that agrees upon minimum standards for defining and sanctioning corruption offences, as well as preventive measures and rules for effective investigation and prosecution. Negotiations with the European Parliament, which adopted its position in February 2024, are ongoing to finalise the legislative text.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission (2024). EU network against corruption. Available at: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/eu-network-against-corruption\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/eu-network-against-corruption_en)



Finally, a new website <https://fightagainstcorruption.eu/> has been launched to support the EU Network Against Corruption. The site includes news, event summaries and thematic podcast episodes on anti-corruption initiatives within the EU. It is managed by the Local Research Correspondents on Corruption (LRCC), who provide independent expertise to the European Commission on corruption issues based on country-specific and thematic knowledge. The LRCC is part of the EU Network Against Corruption and is managed by contractor Ecorys.

## 2.2 Reflections from the audience

The European Commission's update on activities since the first plenary meeting last year prompted several questions from participants. The proposal for the Rules of Procedure was generally well received, though some participants had some additional suggestions about specific articles including the organisation and management of meetings. A representative from DG HOME encouraged participants to submit their remarks in writing, inviting further discussion in a follow-up session.



## 3 Session 1: Cross-border anti-corruption networks

This session aimed to get acquainted with some of the cross-border anti-corruption networks operating in the European Union to raise awareness of their important work and stimulate synergies. The session was moderated by a representative of the European Commission's DG HOME.

### 3.1 European Partners against Corruption (EPAC/EACN)

The European Partners against Corruption (EPAC) and the European contact-point network against corruption (EACN) are the oldest and largest independent forums for practitioners focused on preventing and combating corruption. EPAC includes anti-corruption authorities and police oversight bodies from Council of Europe Member States, while EACN is a formal network of EU anti-corruption authorities, established by the Council of the European Union. Their efforts are organised into two key strands: anti-corruption authorities (ACAs) and police oversight bodies (POBs). Both networks aim to foster international cooperation, promote independent oversight of anti-corruption work, develop common standards and best practices and provide a platform for knowledge exchange. They convene annually at a professional conference to review progress and share experiences. The Secretariat, led by Lithuania's Special Investigation Service (STT) oversees communications, newsletters and a contact catalogue. The 2024-25 work programme focuses on supporting the rule of law, fostering knowledge exchange and strengthening cooperation and communication.

### 3.2 Network of Corruption Prevention Authorities (NCPA)

The Network of Corruption Prevention Authorities (NCPA) was established in 2018 during the GRECO international conference in Croatia. This initiative launched an international network of anti-corruption bodies, aimed at fostering cooperation and coordination in the prevention of corruption. Initially, 17 countries signed the founding declaration and the network since has grown to 32 members and 8 affiliates, comprising partners and observers. The NCPA's primary objectives are facilitating the exchange of information and best practices as well as promoting common standards in anti-corruption efforts. Its mission includes enabling members to pool resources, enhance the systematic collection and management of data, strengthen institutional capacities and promote operational independence. Furthermore, the network is dedicated to recognising and advancing international standards in corruption prevention, while encouraging dialogue on integrity and anti-corruption. NCPA's daily activities involve sharing experiences and best practices through webinars, technical documents and guidelines. It also maps anti-corruption efforts and participates in international events, such as the Conference of State Parties to the UN Convention against Corruption. Looking ahead, the NCPA will explore emerging issues such as corruption and environmental crime, corruption in ports and its linkages with organised crime. The network actively encourages collaboration and participation in events related to these topics, reinforcing its commitment to strengthening global anti-corruption efforts. At the EU level, NCPA will work on supporting the implementation of the Directive on combating corruption through its contacts with EU prevention authorities as well as on better guidance for the private sector on an anti-corruption compliance programme to work towards EU guidelines for private companies.

### 3.3 European Network for Public Ethics (ENPE)

The European Network for Public Ethics (ENPE) currently brings together 15 public integrity authorities from EU Member States. The network was created in June 2022, at the initiative of the High Authority for Transparency in Public Life in France. The national Anti-Corruption Authority of Italy currently holds the presidency of the network, for a term of two years until October 2026 and the High Authority manages it

secretariat. The network aims to promote a culture of public integrity, harmonise regulations among EU Member States, share insights with European institutions, exchange best practices and create a community of practitioners. To facilitate discussion and collaboration, the network has conducted four plenary thematic meetings and four online meetings. The launch meeting in Paris in June 2022 was followed by a meeting in Zagreb in November 2022 that focused on revolving-door policies. In October 2023 the network convened in Ljubljana to address reporting obligations. The plenary meeting held in October 2024 in Rome concentrated on preventive measures and conflicts of interest. As part of its initiatives, the network has developed a common minimum standard for the reporting obligations of public officials and conducted two comparative studies. Additionally, it has produced a position paper emphasising the importance of incorporating preventive measures into the proposed EU anti-corruption Directive and recently adopted the Rome declaration supporting these preventive measures. These activities reflect the network's commitment to enhancing public integrity across the European Union and fostering collaboration among member authorities.

### 3.4 Network of European Integrity and Whistleblowing Authorities (NEIWA)

The Network of European Integrity and Whistleblowing Authorities (NEIWA) was established in May 2019 in response to the development of the EU Directive on whistleblower protection (Directive 2019/1937). Initially comprising eight authorities, NEIWA since has expanded to include 36 authorities. The network fosters collaboration among its members and with national, European and international public organisations to develop common activities in the areas of whistleblowing and integrity. It also supports the effective transposition of the EU Directive by Member States and promotes its practical implementation. Furthermore, NEIWA seeks to disseminate its experiences, knowledge and recommendations while actively engaging stakeholders, including civil society and legislators. NEIWA's activities encompass several key areas: 1) prevention and education, 2) reporting and investigation, 3) providing advice and 4) ensuring protection and support for whistleblowers. The network facilitates direct contact with whistleblowers, allowing for first-hand insights into the enforcement of protection measures, including their strengths, weaknesses, gaps and legislative loopholes. As a knowledge platform, NEIWA serves as a tool to enhance the effective application of the Directive's principles. It provides a forum for expert deliberation on the functioning of different countries' models for handling whistleblowing reports and protecting whistleblowers. Additionally, NEIWA acts as a collaboration hub, advocating for its members in implementing the Directive on whistleblower protection and serving as a central point for fostering cooperation between members, EU institutions, international organisations and NGOs.

### 3.5 Internal Criminal Investigations Network (ICIN)

The Internal Criminal Investigations Network (ICIN) was the newest network being presented at the EU Network plenary meeting. ICIN is an operational network that encompasses 27 countries and 32 partner organisations. Its primary objective is to provide a platform for law enforcement agencies conducting criminal investigations involving employees of police and public sector organisations. To achieve this, ICIN facilitates the sharing of best practices and methodologies, promotes the exchange of information and enhances public confidence in its member organisations, including police agencies and Europol. Additionally, the network aims to strengthen cooperation among member countries and enhance the skills and competencies within the network by encouraging joint training in relevant areas.

### 3.6 Reflections from the audience

The session on cross-border anti-corruption networks sparked engaging discussions, particularly regarding the existing cooperation among these networks and potential strategies for strengthening their collaboration, including with civil society. The panellists expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to bring together all relevant European anti-corruption networks in order to facilitate dialogue and communication between them

and to promote synergies. In light of this, the idea of implementing a shared calendar to coordinate and be aware of activities across all networks was proposed.



## 4 Session 2: Assessing corruption risks at the national level

This session focused on assessing corruption risks across various sectors. The panel introduced the methodology for corruption risk assessment (CRA), followed by an in-depth exploration of national perspectives on corruption risks assessments. This session was moderated by an international anti-corruption researcher.

### 4.1 Central European University

The session commenced with an introduction to the methodology of CRAs aiming to identify weaknesses within systems that may create opportunities for corruption. While CRAs do not directly identify instances of corruption, they focus on potential vulnerabilities in institutional design, legislation, procedures, or regulations that could facilitate corrupt behaviour. CRAs can be conducted by public bodies, civil society organisations and private sector entities. The representative from Central European University outlined three approaches to CRA: centralised, decentralised and transparency-oriented. The centralised approach is executed by an external body, while the decentralised approach involves internal assessments by each individual authority. The transparency-oriented approach is conducted by anti-corruption bodies, NGOs, media outlets or ministries. To conduct a CRA, various levels of data are utilised, ranging from primary data (such as focus groups and statistical information collected by the implementing anti-corruption agency) to secondary data (including media investigations and corruption perception surveys). The speaker also highlighted several challenges associated with CRA. Institutional constraints may include the need for collaboration among public institutions, sufficient financial resources and political and institutional support. Additionally, challenges related to data accessibility, such as reliability, accuracy, completeness and consistency were noted. Other challenges mentioned include issues with the methodology itself, the analytical focus and the effectiveness of follow-up mechanisms.

### 4.2 Ministry of Justice of the Czech Republic

The Czech Ministry of Justice presented the findings and methodology of its project “Corruption in selected sectors of the Czech Republic and possibilities of its reduction.” This initiative applied advanced research methodologies to assess corruption risks across six key sectors: healthcare, public procurement, education and science, sports, debt foreclosure and construction and planning proceedings. A notable feature of the project was its focus on gathering insights from individuals with direct experience of corrupt practices, rather than relying solely on perception-based measures. This approach provided a more accurate and grounded understanding of corruption within each sector. The project used a triangulated methodology, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods to ensure the robustness and depth of its findings. The findings indicated that while the overall level of corruption is not worsening, certain forms of corruption are becoming more entrenched. The study revealed that corruption manifests differently across sectors, with a distinction between petty corruption and grand corruption. Education was found to be more associated with petty corruption, while grand corruption was more prevalent in sectors such as debt foreclosure and public procurement. Some sectors, such as sports, healthcare and construction, exhibit both petty and grand corruption. The project’s sector-specific insights have enabled the operationalisation of measures to address corruption and have contributed to the Czech Ministry of Justice’s broader anti-corruption strategy.

### 4.3 National Anti-Corruption Authority, Italy

The representative of the Italian National Anti-Corruption Authority provided a detailed overview of the risks of corruption in public procurement, highlighting the sector's particular vulnerability despite the existence of anti-corruption measures and emphasising, therefore, the importance of ensuring transparency, today especially through digitalisation and communication tools. The main asset used by the Italian National Anti-Corruption Authority to support this strategy, is the National Database of Public Contracts, aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability in procurement processes, as well as efficiency and simplification. In fact, digitalisation is not only a guarantee of transparency, but also of efficiency. Consequently, the speaker elaborated on the methodologies used to measure corruption risks in public procurement, which rely upon both procurement-specific indicators from public databases and broader socio-economic data. Before explaining the details of the project, he noted that for any measurement activity to be successful, it is important not only to have indicators, but also to validate them and validation requires data and experience. In the specific case, the National Anti-Corruption Authority ensures the availability of data by integrating as many data sources as possible, including the National Database of Public Contracts and guarantees experience thanks to the activity carried out for a decade in the field of public procurement and corruption prevention. The indicators used to measure corruption are categorised into context indicators, public procurement risk indicators and municipal-level risk indicators. These tools play a critical role in identifying vulnerabilities and informing target interventions. However, the speaker emphasised that the focus should not be exclusively on measurement. Addressing the overall process is equally important to achieve simplification, transparency and accountability. In this sense, what makes the difference is above all the availability of data in an open, uniform and comparable format.

### 4.4 Special Investigation Service of the Republic of Lithuania

The Special Investigation Service (STT) of the Republic of Lithuania presented its methodology for assessing corruption risks, highlighting two processes: corruption risks analysis and the determination of the probability of corruption occurrence. The corruption risks analysis is an external, independent assessment implemented by the STT, offering an objective evaluation of potential corruption risks and their factors in any state, public or municipal institution or State-owned and municipality-owned enterprise. It also includes providing recommendations for risk elimination and the process of monitoring the implementation of recommendations. This process requires the specialised expertise of the Corruption Risk Division staff, allowing for a more comprehensive review. The areas selected for assessment are based on legally established criteria to ensure a targeted and effective approach. In contrast, the assessment of the likelihood of corruption occurrence is a self-assessment carried out by the respective public bodies. This approach, which does not require specialised expertise, is supported by a well-established methodology and training to ensure effective implementation. Both processes aim to enhance anti-corruption measures by identifying and addressing potential vulnerabilities within public institutions.



## 5 Session 3: High-risk areas of corruption in the EU

In this session, researchers presented the first findings of a study on high-risk areas of corruption in the EU, followed by an interactive consultation with the audience. This session was moderated by Ecorys.

### 5.1 University of Gothenburg

The operational objectives of the study were to map high-risk areas of corruption within EU Member States and to conduct an in-depth analysis of the character, causes and consequences of corruption in six identified high-risk areas. The researchers explained their methodology, by first defining corruption and explaining their criteria for identifying high-risk areas, which were based on four key elements: 1) frequency, 2) theoretical expectations, 3) consequences and 4) anticipation. To gather data, the study employed a mixed methods approach that included secondary data collection, expert surveys and expert interviews. After data collection, six high-risk areas for corruption were identified of particular relevance for the in-depth analysis: procurement, healthcare, financial sector, construction and infrastructure, defence and security and sports. Each area was analysed through three thematic lenses: the character of corruption, the causes of corruption and the consequences of corruption. This comprehensive approach led to preliminary findings and implications that suggest that corruption often results in considerable short- and long-term costs, even for ordinary citizens. While laws and policies are essential, they are not sufficient to address systemic corruption effectively. Additionally, there is a notable knowledge gap that inhibits a comprehensive understanding of the methods and actors involved in corruption. Finally, the study highlighted the blurred distinctions between corruption and crime, emphasising the complexity of these issues.

### 5.2 Reflections from the audience

The presentation of the findings regarding the high-risk areas of corruption within EU Member States was followed by an interactive session, allowing participants to engage with live polls on the identified high-risk areas and providing opportunities for questions and comments. After initial general questions about their countries and the types of organisations they represent, the focus shifted to specific high-risk areas. Participants were asked to rank their top three sectors most susceptible to corruption. While all areas in focus of the report were acknowledged, public procurement, construction and infrastructure and the healthcare sector were cited most frequently. The sports sector received less emphasis in this ranking. Following this question, participants were presented with an open-ended question asking them to identify other areas within their respective countries that are at high risk of corruption. While the answers varied from political elections to gender, the most mentioned areas were education, environmental issues, energy and media.

This session sparked discussions about both the presentation and the interactive component. Regarding the presentation on the findings of high-risk areas, some participants expressed critical perspectives, particularly concerning the classification of public procurement as one of the high-risk areas, stating it was an overarching issue present everywhere. Some participants also reflected on areas that were ranked high in parts of the mapping but did not end up as one of the six areas identified as being of particular relevance for the in-depth analysis. The interactive component further stimulated dialogue, with participants acknowledging that high-risk areas may be context-specific and sensitive to the unique circumstances of each country. Different views on various areas were exchanged including the low ranking of the sports sector. The societal importance of integrity in sports was lifted by some of the participants as it influences children and should thus not be overlooked.



## 6 Session 4: Success stories and strategies for fighting high-level corruption

In the final session, speakers discussed how to pursue efficient investigation, prosecution and adjudication of high-level corruption cases while fostering the involvement and exposure of NGOs in detecting them. Speakers covered the main obstacles to fighting high-level corruption and shared success stories to inspire other practitioners and provide insights to all participants.

### 6.1 Anti-Corruption Fund Foundation Bulgaria (ACF)

The Anti-Corruption Fund Foundation (ACF) in Bulgaria is an independent civil society organisation active in investigating and analysing corruption, especially at high levels of government in Bulgaria. ACF has built a solid national and international reputation as an independent expert civil society organisation serving the public interest. It conducts its own research on suspected corruption, screens media reports and gathers tips from citizens and whistleblowers. ACF compiles reports and demands institutional action, publishing findings to ensure public accountability. ACF's work focuses on three pillars: investigation, reporting and citizen mobilisation.

ACF produces an annual monitoring report detailing suspected high-level corruption cases and the work of anti-corruption bodies such as Bulgaria's Anti-Corruption Commission and the Prosecutor's Office. These reports are necessary because state institutions such as the Prosecutor's Office have a limited track record in the prosecution and final judgments in high-level corruption cases. ACF's 2024 report analysed 57 national and 25 local cases of high-level corruption, revealing poor prosecution outcomes: only four convictions with one prison sentence, while many cases ended in acquittals or were dismissed early.

ACF faces challenges in accessing information due to resistance from public institutions, especially during pre-trial investigations, despite legal obligations to publish certain documents and rulings. The ACF's efforts aim to increase transparency and hold public officials accountable, addressing the gap in Bulgaria's fight against high-level corruption.

### 6.2 Romanian National Anticorruption Directorate

The Romanian National Anticorruption Directorate presented success stories of three high-level corruption cases that led to final judgements.

The first case presented involved the former president of the Romanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, who also served as the president of the Court of International Commercial Arbitration. This person, with deep connections in both politics and the justice system, was implicated in several criminal activities. Initially he was charged with embezzling funds from the Romanian Chamber of Commerce. During the investigation, a second offense emerged when it was discovered he was trying to influence the legislative process through bribery. Wiretaps revealed he had contacted Members of Parliament from various political parties, offering them referee assignments at the Court of International Commercial Arbitration in exchange for their support in passing a law that served his interests. Additionally, a formal complaint for influence peddling was filed against him. He had asked for €1 million from a person to sway the outcome of a €4 million trial at the Court of Arbitration. A monitored meeting was arranged, where he received a down payment of €200,000. Ultimately, he was convicted of all charges and sentenced to eight years in prison.

The second case involved a major tax evasion scheme connected to corruption within the justice system. This scheme was led by a group of individuals who owned several large companies in the food industry. Their objective was to avoid paying taxes and reduce their prices to dominate the market. The investigation revealed that the group was using over 40 ghost companies to facilitate the tax evasion scheme. This case also exposed corruption in the justice system, as some judicial figures were involved in protecting these illegal activities. The scale of the tax evasion and the corruption uncovered demonstrated the deep-rooted issues in Romania's business and legal sectors.

Finally, the representative shared a case of influence peddling by a judge in a high-stakes commercial dispute. This case involved a judge using their position to sway the outcome of a significant business trial for personal gain, underscoring the pervasive influence of corruption at high levels of the judiciary.

### 6.3 Austrian Economic and Corruption Prosecutor's Office

The Central Public Prosecutor's Office for Combating Economic Crimes and Corruption (Austrian Economic and Corruption Prosecutor's Office) in Austria handles corruption cases including bribery, acceptance of advantages and acceptance of advantages for the purpose of exercising influence if the value of the benefit granted (or bribe given) is more than €3,000. Cases with bribes or advantages granted below this threshold are handled by the local public prosecutor's offices. The Austrian Economic and Corruption Prosecutor's Office (WKStA) is also responsible for prosecuting white-collar criminal cases with damages in excess of 5 million euros. In addition, the WKStA can also take on cases of corruption or white-collar crime if the value thresholds mentioned are not reached but the cases are of particular public interest, for example against high-ranking politicians.

There is a notable "race against technology" in handling corruption cases, as advancements in technology present both challenges and opportunities. Data plays a critical role in investigations, but too much data can overwhelm investigators. AI models will increasingly become useful to screen large volumes of data and identify crucial evidence for finding the "smoking gun." However, navigating the balance between technology and manual investigation remains a key challenge.

Success has been seen in whistle blower systems and of course also in leniency models, where persons of interest can open up about corruption cases. To fall under the leniency model, individuals must collaborate with the prosecution, confess, express regret and provide new evidence. However, unlike in Romania, for example, the leniency model in Austria cannot be applied if force has already been used to investigate the crime, if the person of interest has been arrested. The lawmakers wanted to prevent situations where the cooperation of a person might be obtained "by force".

The office has dealt with high-profile cases such as the "Cash for Laws" scandal involving an Austrian member of the European Parliament, who has been a former minister in Austria. An ongoing high-profile case is the investigation into a former Austrian chancellor regarding media corruption and public money misuse.

The office also monitors international developments in the fight against corruption. The acquittals in the "Panama Papers" proceedings and the Supreme Court decisions in Brazil on the prohibition of the use of evidence in the Odebrecht proceedings were particularly noteworthy. This highlights the difference between the "material truth" approach in continental Europe, which seeks the full truth and the "formal truth" approach in the USA, where legal technicalities can play a larger role. An efficient fight against corruption requires a procedural system that strikes a balance between the fundamental procedural rights of the accused and the challenges of law enforcement.

#### 6.4 Reflections from the audience

During the discussion, a question arose regarding the application of the **leniency model** in cases involving the use of force. The Austrian representative clarified that in **Austria**, the leniency model cannot be applied once **state force** has been used. This means that if coercion or violence is involved in a case, individuals cannot benefit from the leniency program, which typically allows for reduced sentences in exchange for cooperation, confession and the provision of new evidence.

In contrast, the representative explained that in **Romania**, the leniency model can still be applied even if force in the investigation has been used. This difference highlights a significant divergence between the legal systems of the two countries in how they approach leniency in cases involving the use of state force during criminal proceedings.



## 7 Conclusion

The closing remarks of the meeting were given by the DG HOME of the European Commission, which expressed its satisfaction with the discussions and suggestions made during the event. The meeting provided an opportunity for all existing cross-border EU networks to present themselves, as promised last year. The network representatives confirmed that the EU network provided the first opportunity to meet and exchange information about their organisations. DG HOME took note of the need for a shared calendar of events and will look into hosting one that is accessible to all networks. DG HOME encouraged the network to continue working together, both within the network and with other relevant authorities. Furthermore, the presentation provided insights into high-risk areas at the national and European level, including how Italy addresses risks in public procurement. In addition, success stories from Romania, Austria and civil society in Bulgaria on the efficient investigation, prosecution and adjudication of high-level corruption cases were shared.

In terms of upcoming events, follow-up discussions on the anti-corruption country chapters will be held in different Member States between October and December.



# About Ecorys

Ecorys is a leading international research and consultancy company, addressing society's key challenges. With world-class research-based consultancy, we help public and private clients make and implement informed decisions leading to positive impact on society. We support our clients with sound analysis and inspiring ideas, practical solutions and delivery of projects for complex market, policy and management issues.

In 1929, businessmen from what is now Erasmus University Rotterdam founded the Netherlands Economic Institute (NEI). Its goal was to bridge the opposing worlds of economic research and business – in 2000, this much respected Institute became Ecorys.

Throughout the years, Ecorys expanded across the globe, with offices in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Our staff originates from many different cultural backgrounds and areas of expertise because we believe in the power that different perspectives bring to our organisation and our clients.

Ecorys excels in seven areas of expertise:

- Economic growth;
- Social policy;
- Natural resources;
- Regions & Cities;
- Transport & Infrastructure;
- Public sector reform;
- Security & Justice.

Ecorys offers a clear set of products and services:

- preparation and formulation of policies;
- programme management;
- communications;
- capacity building;
- monitoring and evaluation.

We value our independence, our integrity and our partners. We care about the environment in which we work and live. We have an active Corporate Social Responsibility policy, which aims to create shared value that benefits society and business. We are ISO 14001 certified, supported by all our staff.







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