

Mister State Secretary,

Mister Secretary-General of the Benelux,

Mister Director of the European Commission,

Mister Chief Academic Administrator,

Dear representatives of the judiciary, of the Federal Police and of the many
inspection services

Dear guests,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you at this inauguration on behalf of IRIS, the International Research Institute on Social Fraud, the newest research centre of Ghent University. As you may know, only a few days after the entry into force of the new Social Criminal Code, although this was really not planned.

For us, months of preparatory work are crowned with this inauguration. Indeed, for a long time, we have had the idea to establish a centre that would conduct research into cross-border social fraud. Several speakers before me have already pointed out the social importance of this phenomenon and the dangers involved. Therefore, I only want to briefly remind you. Social fraud indeed has large-scale consequences. Contributions are not being paid or benefits are being paid which are not due, which, among others, endangers our social model. It also leads to unfair competition causing social dumping and the deterioration of social rights. And actually, it also harms the foundations of the credibility of and the trust in our social model, as well as the willingness to show solidarity between the citizens, but also between the Member States of the European Union. Several speakers have also emphasised the international dimension of social fraud.

Furthermore, the growing European internal market and the world-wide globalisation have increased the awareness that, apart from a national problem, social fraud is an international problem as well. More than 300 years ago, the famous American scientist and politician Benjamin Franklin wrote "There is no kind of dishonesty into which otherwise good people more easily and frequently fall than that of defrauding the government".

Social fraud is a comprehensive phenomenon and has many forms. To successfully fight it, social fraud should be further investigated and described. This allows us to gain more insight in the way social fraud basically works and it provides essential insights with regard to the preventive approach towards the problem. Furthermore, it can also help in the fight against social fraud. Social fraud often originates from loopholes in legislation and *modi operandi*, the evasion of the legal framework and the use, but also the misuse, of legal constructions. Particularly in situations where the demarcation lines between departments, institutions, countries or disciplines (unnecessarily) hamper a smooth cooperation and exchange of knowledge and data or even render these impossible. Insufficient exchange of knowledge and information – both with regard to social fraud itself as with regard to the actors in the field in question – may lead to a sub-optimal cooperation, the result of which is that too often fraud is still able to grow abundantly.

For this reason, the research on social fraud should not be a mere academic exercise. It must lead to knowledge which can be applied and implemented in practice and policy. This knowledge should allow to improve the prevention of and the fight against social fraud and to make the social model more efficient, more just and more effective. The fact is that the fight against social fraud needs a solid knowledge of the structure of the – national or international – legal systems involved. But it should not only concern theory. On the contrary! Practical experience is vital in order to effectively and attentively adjust the legal-technical framework system.

There are two lessons to be learned from this. In the first place, the study of and the approach towards social fraud needs to be multidisciplinary. Studying this phenomenon, the academic point of view cannot do without the fundamental lessons and experience from actual practice. In both fields, different lines of approach need to be given the chance to be dealt with. With regard to the academic part, the science and study of law plays a leading role, since the technical framework is of a legal nature. Nevertheless, insights from criminology, economics, psychology and the political and social sciences are of utmost importance as well.

Secondly, with regard to the practical field, it goes without saying that contributions and input from actors from the public sector as well as from the private sector are not merely important, but essential. For instance, input from the actors within competent inspection services, the competent federal public services and the cooperating institutions, the private insurers etc...

In this respect, the Institute aims to be a forum where practice and theory meet and inspire each other. Next to a knowledge base, it also wants to be a centre for an international network of actors from the different fields for the prevention and study of social fraud. This way, they can come into contact with each other, exchange experience and knowledge and stay up to date. Precisely in order to become this academic support for actors from the field, IRIS will realise various activities. For example, the organisation of multidisciplinary national and international seminars and congresses. This late autumn, a first international congress will take place on cross-border information sharing for the fight against social fraud. Another example is the development of a documentation centre and of the website where the most important information is gathered and made available online, such as comparative reports and studies, etc. Very soon, for instance, you may expect the English translation of the new Social Criminal Code by the centre.

In the meantime, don't hesitate to visit our website iris.ugent.be and check it regularly, because just like IRIS itself, the website is a work in progress with high ambitions.

However, ladies and gentlemen, we want to devote this afternoon primarily to the second main objective of IRIS, which is to be a centre where the academic world and the actors in the field can meet each other in a large network. And that is why I want to take this opportunity to thank the respectable speakers for honouring this inauguration with their presence and also for announcing this important initiative on multilateral cooperation. Furthermore, I am pleased to see that you have decided to attend so numerously, which encourages us in our ambitions and it is with great pleasure that I invite you all to the reception where we can exchange our thoughts further in a pleasant atmosphere.

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