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Romanian Gang Busted After £47 Million HMRC Phishing Scam

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— Categories: Crime



Thirteen Romanian nationals have been arrested following a major phishing scam that defrauded His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) of approximately £47 million. In a separate but related investigation, a fourteenth suspect, believed to be British, was also taken into custody in Preston, Lancashire.

The coordinated arrests took place across the Romanian counties of Ilfov, Giurgiu, and Calarasi. Backed by more than 100 Romanian police officers, HMRC investigators assisted in the operation, which targeted individuals suspected of carrying out a sophisticated phishing campaign. The group, aged between 23 and 53, is thought to be part of a wider

organised criminal network accused of stealing money by submitting fake claims for payroll tax (PAYE), Value Added Tax (VAT) refunds, and Child Benefit payments.

HMRC has confirmed that, unlike typical scams targeting the public, this fraud saw criminals extract money directly from the tax authority. Officials were quick to point out that a cyberattack had not compromised their systems. Instead, stolen login credentials and personal data appear to have been used to file bogus claims. Affected customer accounts have since been locked down, and new credentials have been issued to prevent further misuse.

Cross-Border Operation

This significant enforcement action follows troubling revelations shared with Parliament's Treasury Committee in early June. During a session with officials from HMRC, the Committee was told that around 100,000 customers were impacted by phishing scams, leading to a combined loss of £47 million to the taxpayer. The Committee later posted the update on social media, fuelling public concern about the scale and sophistication of these attacks.

To tackle the issue, a joint investigation team has been set up between HMRC, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), and Romanian authorities, including the Prosecutor's Office attached to the Court of Appeal in Bucharest. The suspects in Romania were arrested by officers from the Economic Crimes Investigation Directorate on suspicion of computer fraud, money laundering, and unauthorised access to IT systems.

Simon Grunwell, operational lead in HMRC's fraud investigation service, praised the collaborative effort. "We have a number of live criminal investigations, and we are grateful to our Romanian partners for their support," he said. His comments indicate that this may not be the last such operation, as HMRC continues to dig deeper into similar criminal networks.

In a statement issued on July 10, HMRC confirmed the arrests and clarified that the individual detained in Preston was part of a separate ongoing investigation. While no evidence links him directly to the Romanian group, both operations reflect HMRC's broader crackdown on fraud.

According to 2022 data, HMRC is one of the most impersonated government bodies in the U.K., behind only the National Health Service (NHS) and TV Licensing. This latest case

highlights the need for stronger digital safeguards, particularly as criminals become more tech-savvy and organised.

Though details remain scarce, it's clear this was no one-off scam. The arrests signal that law enforcement and tax officials are stepping up the fight against cyber-enabled fraud, even if significant work remains to protect public funds from future threats.