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Discussion Paper

Session 1. Organised crime as a global threat: enhancing international cooperation, especially in the fight against drug trafficking

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Organised crime in Europe

Organised crime is a major threat to European citizens, public administrations and institutions, as well as to the economy and society as a whole. It undermines the rule of law and the institutions responsible for ensuring the security and well-being of our societies.

Organised crime has evolved in recent years into a phenomenon characterised by its operation through networks, which often involve accomplices and facilitators around the world. It shows a pattern of a very fluid, systemic cooperation between criminals, driven by a common profit motivation.

Criminal organisations constantly adapt their *modi operandi* and progressively, integrating digital means and tools (anonymisation, encryption, dark web, artificial intelligence) to plan and conduct criminal activities. The use of social media and instant messaging services allows for establishing fast and wide connections, advertising illegal products and for recruiting, controlling and organising the transport of victims of trafficking in human beings.

In order to effectively combat organised crime, law enforcement authorities need to implement a number of activities and initiatives, from fostering innovation to staying ahead of criminals and adopting strategic plans and EU law, or enhancing operational cooperation and exchanging information among national authorities and with third parties.

Major criminal activities and threats

According to the EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (EU SOCTA) 2021, 80 per cent of criminal networks detected in the EU are involved in drug trafficking, organised property crime, excise fraud, trafficking in human beings, online and other frauds, or migrant smuggling. Among these activities, trafficking in illicit drugs continues to dominate serious and organised crime in the EU, accounting for almost 40% of crime.

The increasing scale and impact of illicit drug trafficking are reaching levels that make it a question of national – and global – security. Illicit drug trafficking represents one of the most pressing and dangerous challenges. Firstly, it undermines the rule of law and public institutions, as it is increasingly linked to corruption and extreme violence, and infiltrates the legal economy. Secondly, it represents the most prevalent organised criminal activity in the EU, with the highest numbers of criminals and criminal networks involved. Thirdly, the production, trafficking and distribution of illegal drugs generates enormous profits. Last, it has devastating consequences for the health and well-being of citizens, as well as for the environment and climate change.

Criminal networks involved in illicit drug trafficking in the EU drive illicit trafficking of a broad range of substances, from cannabis, cocaine, heroin and synthetic drugs and their precursors to new psychoactive substances (NPS), including highly dangerous fentanyl, which emerges as a potential new threat.

In addition, the actions of criminal organisations are very pervasive. Criminal organisations infiltrate into the socio-economic structures and use corruption and intimidation of both private and public agents and they increasingly use extreme violence.

According to EU SOCTA 2021, more than 80 % of the criminal networks in the EU use legal businesses to launder profits, further criminal activities and infiltrate the economy, and 60 per cent of all criminal networks engage in corruption activities. With their enormous profits (EUR 140 billion every year), the high availability of cash and misuse of global logistic chains and financial sectors, criminal networks involved in drug trafficking and other crimes favour corruption as their preferred way of doing business.

As a result, the EU is facing a concerning degree of criminal infiltration in key sectors such as ports, banks or real estate, as well as in the law enforcement and judiciary.

Violence as main concern

It is the use of violence by organised crime in the EU that has increased both in terms of frequency and severity. The escalating use of violence by some criminal networks in recent years was confirmed by the recent interim report on new, changing, and emerging threats 2023 ('interim SOCTA'). This worrying trend leads to a perception of insecurity among citizens across the Union. Violence is not only increasing, but also the variety and intensity of violence are also growing.

In certain areas we see an increased use of large-calibre firearms and the indiscriminate use of explosives, as well as the torture and murder of members of rival organisations, assassinations of witnesses, lawyers and investigative journalists, and threats to judges and prosecutors and attacks on police services. In addition, there is a high availability of firearms on the black market, which may be fuelled in the future by the threat of illicit firearms trafficking arising from the unprovoked and unjustified military aggression by Russia against Ukraine.

If these levels of violence are not adequately addressed, there is a risk that violence will spread further, undermining the rule of law in our societies. Criminal organisations might also perceive that they operate in a permissive environment.

Strengthening international cooperation to counter the spread of organised crime

An effective response to this threat has to come from a multidisciplinary strategy, in which international cooperation is indispensable given the global nature of the drugs phenomenon. The EU Strategy to Tackle Organised Crime 2021–2025 promotes international cooperation, including through the activities of the relevant agencies in the area of justice and home affairs, in particular in relation to the enlargement and neighbourhood partners.



The EU Drugs Strategy and Action Plan 2021–2025 calls for stepping up international cooperation, for making it more operational, and for further involving competent EU agencies within their respective mandates in this regard.

Steps have been taken in this direction, by reinforcing Europol's mandate to ensure its role as the hub for criminal intelligence in the EU (including by enabling the Agency to process large and complex datasets), by facilitating the access to electronic evidence, and with proposals to reinforce the rules to prevent money laundering, enhance the effective confiscation of illicit assets and strengthen the offences and sanctions on environmental crime, trafficking in human beings and corruption.

The current policy framework on drugs and organised crime requires to develop information sharing and operational cooperation as regards high-risk drug-related organised crime groups, to concentrate efforts on facilitating the use of investigative tools that are particularly efficient for drug-related crime, and on developing innovative ones to respond and anticipate innovative modus operandi of organised criminal groups.

The EU's European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), provides a solid framework to bring together Member States' law enforcement authorities, EU institutions, bodies, agencies, the public and private sectors, international organisations and third countries.

EMPACT tackles 10 priority crime areas through operational action plans (OAPs)¹ into concrete operational actions, thereby fostering greater cooperation and promoting information exchange between countries and agencies. For 2022 alone, EMPACT actions have led to 9 922 arrests, the identification of 4 019 victims of trafficking of human beings, the seizure of over €180 million, of over 62 tons of drugs, and 9 262 investigations initiated². Currently, there are specific operational actions under implementation within the High-Risk Criminal Networks (HRCN) Operational Action Plan (OAP) and the Drugs related OAPs, both addressing the increased use of violence by organised criminal groups and striving to counter the threat of infiltration and corruption. This cooperation needs to be further developed and strengthened.

Cooperation cannot be limited to the common area of the European Union if it is to be effective. The fight against organised crime requires broadening the areas of inter-regional cooperation. This happens at operational level within the EMPACT setting, and at a political level through dialogues in the area of Justice and Home affairs with the US and the Western Balkans. More specifically on drugs, the EU holds regular dialogues with these same partners, as well as regional dialogues through the EU-CELAC Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism on Drugs, but also with Brazil, China, Colombia, countries from the European neighbourhood and from Central Asia.

The Spanish Presidency intends to boost the EU's security cooperation with a key region: the Latin American countries, with which cooperation is developing in the framework of EU-CLASI relations (including a joint task force on drugs), consolidating a reinforced and structural alliance between

¹ [Council conclusions 7101/23.](#)

² [EMPACT factsheets of results for the year 2022.](#)

the two continents will bring mutual benefits and help to better counter organised crime on both sides of the Atlantic.



Questions for delegations

1. Do Ministers agree that organised crime, particularly drug trafficking, has developed unprecedented patterns of infiltration and violence, making it an issue of national, European and global security? What actions should we carry out in order to address this situation? Which instruments should we apply or further develop?
2. With which regions should the European Union's cooperation in the fight against organised crime be prioritized? Do Ministers support the Presidency's initiative to encourage a more structured dialogue on internal security issues between the EU and Latin American countries within the context of EU-CLASI cooperation, in synergy with other cooperation fora?

Agence Europe

