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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL**

on the EU roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime

1. INTRODUCTION

The drugs trade orchestrated by organised crime is **one of the most serious security threats facing Europe today, and the situation is escalating**: this is clearly demonstrated by the unprecedented increase of illicit drugs available in Europe, in particular cocaine from South America. In August 2023, it took only 2 weeks for the record of 8 tonnes of cocaine seized in Rotterdam (The Netherlands) to be broken by the seizure of 9.5 tonnes of the drug in the port of Algeciras (Spain). There is also a growing concern over the production and proliferation of synthetic drugs in Europe, which are trafficked globally. A joint analysis made by Europol and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) demonstrated that **drug trafficking is one of the main profit-generating activities** of organised crime, estimated to represent around one fifth of global crime proceeds¹.

In their efforts to make large profits, criminal networks use extreme violence, corruption and intimidation². They are also highly capable to make connections and conceal their plans, as shown by the dismantling of encrypted communication tools such as EncroChat, which has led to at least **6 558 arrests worldwide**³. Economic and financial crimes are key in supporting all criminal activities, and corruption is instrumental to criminal networks. According to Europol's estimates, 60% of criminal networks operating in the EU use corruptive methods to achieve their illicit objectives. Approximately **EUR 4.1 billion of criminal assets** were seized on average per year in 2020 and 2021 in EU Member States. This represents a substantial increase compared to earlier years, but it still remains less than 2% of the estimated yearly proceeds of organised crime⁴. This vast revenue obtained through illicit activities are used for other criminal activities and laundered by professional money laundering syndicates. The revenue is then invested to infiltrate the legal economy, which has far-reaching and destabilising consequences for society, the rule of law and trust in public authorities.

As a highly visible consequence of this threat, criminals' global reach and iron grip on drug trafficking supply chains have led to a wave of violence in the streets. The many victims are not only among rival gangs themselves, but also among innocent people. In 2023, this has included an 11-year-old girl in Antwerp (Belgium) in January, a 10-year-old boy in August in Nîmes (France) and of a 13-year-old boy in September in Stockholm (Sweden), who all died as a consequence of drug-related violence. Moreover, it is estimated 6 200 people in the EU died from a drug overdose in 2021⁵.

The size of the threat and its worldwide reach calls for **strong and sustainable action** at EU and global levels. Therefore, the Commission proposes an EU roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime. The roadmap sets out 17 actions in four priority areas: to strengthen the

¹ https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets_en

² <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/socta-report>

³ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/dismantling-encrypted-criminal-encrochat-communications-leads-to-over-6-500-arrests-and-close-to-eur-900-million-seized>

⁴ [The Other Side of the Coin: An Analysis of Financial and Economic Crime | Europol \(europa.eu\)](https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/the-other-side-of-the-coin)

⁵ European Drug Report 2023, EMCDDA, https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/european-drug-report/2023/drug-induced-deaths_en

resilience of logistic hubs with a European Ports Alliance, to dismantle criminal networks, to increase prevention efforts and to strengthen cooperation with international partners. These actions are to be implemented in 2024 and 2025.

2. EU STRATEGY AND RESPONSE

The **EU strategy to tackle organised crime for 2021-2025**⁶ and the **EU drugs strategy and action plan for 2021-2025**⁷ ('the EU strategies') set out holistic EU policies to tackle these threats based on joint action by the EU and Member States.

The EU is currently implementing these strategies and will continue to work towards achieving their objectives as highlighted in the Sixth Progress Report on the EU Security Union Strategy⁸. The EU strategy to tackle organised crime is contributing to intensifying the EU's collective efforts in the fight against criminal networks. At the same time, with the drugs strategy and action plan, the EU has set out the work for a balanced and multidisciplinary approach that aims to reduce drug supplies by improving security, reducing drug demand with prevention, treatment and care services and addressing drug-related harm. As set out in the strategy, in 2024, the Commission will launch an external evaluation on implementation of the drugs strategy with the aim of presenting the report to the European Parliament and the Council in spring 2025.

In terms of **policy initiatives**, the Commission has put forward **several legislative proposals** to bolster EU legislation to fight criminal networks. This includes strengthening the Asset Recovery and Confiscation Directive⁹, the amendment of Directive 2019/1153 which allows competent authorities access centralised bank account registries, which facilitates financial investigations¹⁰, and a package to strengthen the EU's anti-money laundering rules¹¹. The Commission has also adopted a proposal to reform the EU Customs Union¹². This will significantly strengthen the capacity of customs to stop unsafe or illegal goods from entering the EU and substantially improve cooperation between customs and law enforcement authorities. Furthermore, the Commission proposed to strengthen the EU rules on combating corruption in May 2023¹³.

Law enforcement capabilities have been stepped up with the strengthening of **Europol's mandate**¹⁴, the **proposal for a Police Cooperation Code**, which led to recommendations on

⁶ COM/2021/170 final.

⁷ COM/2020/ 606 final.

⁸ COM/2023/ [exact reference to be included once available].

⁹ COM/2022/245 final.

¹⁰ COM/2021/429 final.

¹¹ COM/2021/421 final, COM/2021/420 final, COM/2021/423 final and Regulation (EU) 2015/847 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2015 on information accompanying transfers of funds and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1781/2006 (Text with EEA relevance) (OJ L 141, 5.6.2015, p. 1).

¹² COM/2023/257 final.

¹³ COM/2023/234 final.

¹⁴ Regulation (EU) 2016/794 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) and replacing and repealing Council Decisions 2009/371/JHA, 2009/934/JHA, 2009/935/JHA, 2009/936/JHA and 2009/968/JHA (OJ L 135 24.5.2016).

operational police cooperation¹⁵, and the adoption of the Directive on the exchange of information between law enforcement authorities¹⁶. The proposed **revision of the Prüm Regulation** will further contribute to these efforts¹⁷.

In recent years, the **EU's judicial response** has also been improved: the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO)¹⁸ was founded as an independent public prosecution office, responsible for investigating, prosecuting, and bringing to justice crimes against the financial interests of the EU. The EPPO is also competent for offences regarding participation in a criminal organisation, if the focus of the criminal activity of such an organisation is to commit criminal offences affecting the Union's financial interests. In addition, to make it easier and faster for police and judicial authorities to access the information they need, the EU adopted a package on cross-border access to **electronic evidence**¹⁹.

To support the EU's collective response to drugs, the EMCDDA's mandate has been strengthened. This aims, in particular, to improve its threat assessment and early warning capacity and to extend its scope to polydrug use, drug markets and supply, and drug precursors. The EMCDDA will become the new **EU Drugs Agency** and will become operational on 2 July 2024²⁰. The new Agency will carry out health and security threat assessments on synthetic drugs. The Agency will also closely monitor synthetic drug developments in the EU and feed this into developing countermeasures. The development of a **European drug alert system** to quickly let national authorities and (potential) drug users know when new dangerous substances enter the market will also be an important step. Lastly, the new mandate provides for the Agency to look into **drug precursors** and to set up a network of forensic and toxicological laboratories to identify new substances and possible trends.

At **operational level**, the EU has strengthened its support for Member States' law enforcement authorities. The **European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Crime Threats (EMPACT)**, the Member-State driven, operational approach to EU internal security, is now a permanent instrument with increased funding. Cooperation with international partners will continue in EMPACT with the support of the Commission. The **Operational Network Against Mafia-Style Organised Criminal Groups** supports complex investigations against high-risk criminal

¹⁵ COM/2021/780 final.

¹⁶ Directive (EU) 2023/977 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 on the exchange of information between the law enforcement authorities of Member States and repealing Council Framework Decision 2006/960/JHA (OJ L 134, 22.5.2023).

¹⁷ COM/2021/784 final.

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ Regulation (EU) 2023/1543 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 July 2023 on European Production Orders and European Preservation Orders for electronic evidence in criminal proceedings and for the execution of custodial sentences following criminal proceedings (OJ L 191, 28.7.2023, p. 118) and Directive (EU) 2023/1544 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 July 2023 laying down harmonised rules on the designation of designated establishments and the appointment of legal representatives for the purpose of gathering electronic evidence in criminal proceedings (OJ L 191, 28.7.2023, p. 181).

²⁰ Regulation (EU) 2023/1322 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 June 2023 on the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1920/2006 (OJ L 166, 30.6.2023).

networks²¹. Already in 2022, this led to excellent operational results: 121 arrests and EUR 12 million of cash seized. 42 criminal networks were identified, and more than 50 high level criminals have been investigated and prosecuted with the support of Europol and Eurojust. Currently driven by Belgium in 2022-2023 and by Italy from 2024-2025, the Commission supports the objectives and innovative approach of this new priority and invites all Member States and international partners to take part. Furthermore, the dismantling of the encrypted communication networks, **EncroChat, SkyECC and ANOM**, supported by Europol, led to many arrests and seizures. In particular, it gave valuable insights into criminal networks' activities and their methods. Europol has supported many other successful investigations conducted by Member States, such as **Operation Desert Light** in November 2022²², in which a 'super cartel' of cocaine traffickers was taken down.

The success of the **Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre – Narcotics (MAOC (N))** in supporting maritime interdictions has so far led to the seizure of 327,653 tonnes of cocaine and 667,344 tonnes of cannabis²³. Moreover, Belgium and Germany have initiated the process to join MAOC (N). The revised **EU Maritime Security Strategy²⁴ and its Action Plan** confirm the commitment for joint operations in departure countries and EU ports, involving MAOC-N, relevant Member States' authorities, and European Commission Services/Agencies.

As organised crime is almost always transnational, the EU is increasing its partnerships with third countries, notably with those on key drug supply routes. This includes enhanced cooperation **with Latin America and the Caribbean**, with the New Agenda for relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean²⁵, the Declaration of the EU-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Summit of 17-18 July 2023²⁶ and cooperation between the EU and the Latin American Committee on Internal Security (CLASI), which confirms the commitment to step up efforts in the areas of justice, security and the fight against transnational criminal networks. The regional technical assistance programmes, such as **EL PACTO, EUROFRONT and COPOLAD III** as well as the **Global Illicit Flows Programme**, have proven to be effective instruments in boosting national and regional capabilities to fight organised crime.

In **West Africa**, cooperation focuses on building up the capacity of state institutions and regional organizations to tackle drug trafficking at sea. Since 2018, the EU has put in place a set of complementary regional programmes aimed at supporting ECOWAS countries' efforts to combat transnational organised crime and illicit trafficking, cybercrime as well as money laundering and the financing of terrorism²⁷. In the **Horn of Africa**, the EU Naval Force Operation ATALANTA

²¹ Funded through the Internal Security Fund, EUR 2 million for 2024-2025.

²² <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/heat-rising-european-super-cartel-taken-down-in-six-countries>

²³ [Statistics – MAOC \(N\)](#).

²⁴ The revised EUMSS has been sent to the Council for its endorsement

²⁵ JOIN 2023/17 final

²⁶ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-12000-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

²⁷ The West-African Response on Cybersecurity and Fight against Cybercrime (OCWAR-C), the West-African response to the fight against Money Laundering and the financing of Terrorism (OCWAR-M) and the West-African response to Trafficking (OCWAR-T).

contributes to the disruption of drug trafficking and weapons trafficking, as well as to the deterrence, prevention and repression of acts of piracy and armed robbery off the Somali coast. The EU is also firmly committed to address illegal money flows through a dedicated **Team Europe Initiative on Illicit Financial Flows for Sub-Sahara Africa**.

North Africa and the Middle East are a major source, transit and destination of illicit drugs and the illicit drug business is growing. Programmes funded by the EU such as the **EU4Monitoring Drugs** have analysed the emergence of new drug trafficking routes, the expansions of online markets and the availability of a broader spectrum of substances.

Furthermore, in **Central Asia**, the EU has designed two important regional security programmes to deliver on its strategy helping Central Asian partners to tackle some of the risks associated to drugs crime, including those emanating from Afghanistan. The **Central Asia Drug Action Programme** (CADAP) contributes to the reduction of drug use and supports Central Asian Governments' drug policies, and more specifically to improve access to quality drug demand reduction interventions. The **Border Management Programme in Central Asia** (BOMCA), fosters sustainable economic development through integrated border management, focusing on capacity building and institutional development, facilitating trade, improving border management systems, and eliminating illicit trafficking across Central Asia.

The **EU cooperation with the Western Balkans** remains a priority. The increased participation of our Western Balkan partners in international police operations, their closer cooperation with Europol via the posting of liaison officers to Europol headquarters, their involvement in EMPACT and participation in Joint Investigation Teams have brought significant operational results. EU financial and technical support will continue to be provided. It is crucial that all Western Balkan partners establish functioning Early Warning Systems and National Drugs Observatories to improve their exchange of data with the EMCDDA and conclude Working Arrangements with the EU Agency.

Lastly, Six Member States (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands) have set up a **Coalition against Serious and Organised Crime**, to which the Commission, Europol and Eurojust participate. The Coalition has put forward several important operational actions of common interest, which are broadly in line with the EU strategies and involve EU agencies, bodies and frameworks, such as EMPACT. Actions focus, in particular, on identifying operational needs, strengthening the security of logistic hubs and maritime security, disrupting criminal money flows, empowering law enforcement with technology and innovation, and strengthening international cooperation. The Commission recognises the efforts made by the Coalition and is setting out this roadmap to take this work to the next level and demonstrate an EU commitment to intensifying efforts.

3. PRIORITY ACTIONS

Criminals are quick to adapt to new opportunities to make a profit. They are also very capable of taking advantage of societies' increased interconnectedness and technological advancements. Against this constantly changing phenomenon, it is essential to bring together the efforts of the

Commission, High Representative, the European Parliament, the Council and EU agencies and bodies around a set of priority actions. To be delivered, the measures need to be implemented through effective cooperation across the EU, engagement with our strategic international partners, and determined political commitment from everyone involved.

This Roadmap focuses on four priority areas for increased action.

First, criminals use logistic hubs in the EU and non-EU countries to carry out their illegal activities and target vulnerable people to carry out criminal activities. The EU therefore needs to **strengthen the resilience of logistic hubs** from being exploited by criminals. This must be done in close cooperation with each other as criminals are constantly looking for the weakest link.

Second, criminal networks are dynamic and increasingly use specialised criminal service providers, bringing more players into the fold. Individual arrests are much needed but not sufficient: it is vital to increase law enforcement and judicial authorities' capabilities to **dismantle criminal networks, disrupt their business models and confiscate their profits**.

A strong focus on **prevention is also necessary**: to prevent people and businesses from being exploited by criminal networks, we need to tackle the root causes of organised crime and take action against criminal activities as a permanent solution. This requires not only efforts of law enforcement authorities, but also of municipalities and local communities.

Lastly, organised crime has always been a global phenomenon, but recent technological developments have further enabled criminals to operate globally and run their illicit businesses from outside the EU. **International cooperation** is therefore essential to disrupt criminal supply routes and support improvements in both law enforcement and judicial cooperation.

3.1. The European Ports Alliance: strengthening the resilience of logistic hubs

Logistic hubs are crucial gateways to enable EU economic prosperity, the transport of goods across the EU and the proper functioning of the single market. Ports contribute to around 75% of EU external trade volumes and 31% of EU internal trade volumes. Every year, 400 million passengers embark and disembark in EU ports²⁸. However, the strategic role played by logistic hubs makes them vulnerable to **drug smuggling and exploitation by high-risk criminal networks** and their enablers, as recognised in the EU drugs strategy and action plan.

As highlighted in the **joint report** prepared by **Europol** and the **Security Steering Committee of the ports of Antwerp, Hamburg/Bremerhaven and Rotterdam** on criminal networks in EU ports²⁹, there are many opportunities for criminal infiltration and using these ports for illicit

²⁸ European Commission, Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport, Assessment of potential of maritime and inland ports and inland waterways and of related policy measures, including industrial policy measures – Final report, Publications Office, 2020, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2832/03796>

²⁹ https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Europol_Joint-report_Criminal%20networks%20in%20EU%20ports_Public_version.pdf

shipments. Criminals use a variety of methods to transport drugs via maritime shipping containers. These methods include switching to containers that are checked less frequently, using stolen container reference codes (PIN fraud), cloning container registration numbers, and using extraction teams who wait for opportune moments to retrieve a shipment. Crucially, these common methods rely on **corruption** to be successful as criminal networks use port insiders to organise the transport of containers containing drugs and illicit goods into the EU³⁰.

Criminal networks are quick to adapt their supply routes to less protected or smaller harbours. Strengthening the security of logistic hubs therefore calls for a **common EU approach** where those involved work together in a coordinated way. Effective action to protect the ports starts with a **clear assessment of current gaps and weaknesses**. The Commission therefore has started a **Schengen Thematic Evaluation on drug trafficking in ports**. This will result in an evaluation report with best practices in 2023 and a proposal for Council recommendations in early 2024.

In addition, countering drug trafficking – including the downstream disruption of drug trafficking after arrival in the ports – will be part of **two studies the Commission** has launched in 2023 on **maritime data** and on the **law enforcement needs on rail and road transport**, the results of which will be expected in 2024.

To implement these and other findings and best practices, the Commission proposes to strengthen the resilience of the ports through a **European Ports Alliance**. This will require the mobilisation of the customs community as the first line of defence against illegal trade, better law enforcement cooperation to dismantle the criminal networks behind drug trafficking and setting up a public-private partnership to combine efforts to tackle drug trafficking and protect logistic, information technology, human resources, and operational processes against criminal infiltration.

Action 1: Mobilising the customs community against drug trafficking

Main actors: Commission, European Anti-Fraud Office, Member States (in particular customs authorities)

Member State customs authorities are the first line of defence at the EU's external borders to protect the EU from illegal trade, ensure the security of its citizens and protect its financial interests³¹. In this context, where **nearly 70% of all drugs seizures by customs authorities occur at EU ports**, it is essential to strengthen effective collaboration and cooperation between customs authorities, who must act as one, and other stakeholders, especially police authorities. To defend the EU's borders, customs should continue using the available risk management and controls policies and tools effectively.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Council Resolution on customs cooperation in the area of law enforcement and its contribution to the internal security of the EU.

Therefore, through the European Ports Alliance, and financed under the Customs programme³², the Commission will set up a **framework which facilitates the effective risk management and customs controls linked to illicit drugs and drug precursors smuggling** to ensure the cooperation of customs authorities, together with the Commission. As a first step, a **dedicated project group** will be put in place, involving representatives from Member State customs authorities at management and expert level. The project group will map the situation on the ground, work towards a common understanding and coordinated approach, identify gaps and weaknesses in customs supervision, draw up a threat and risk assessment, set out common targeting criteria and share best practices.

This will prepare the ground for even more coordinated and efficient customs controls by setting out **common risk criteria** and **priority customs controls** at EU level. The Commission will propose these for implementation to Member States, combining EU and national risk management tools. These priority controls will improve real-time analysis, collaboration and cooperation between Member States and provide solutions to cover blind spots in the ports and supply chain. The controls will also test an approach for structured information exchange (interoperability or a systematic data exchange framework) to support the fight against drugs and precursor trafficking.

As a continuation of this action and as of mid-2024, the Commission will set up a **new expert team** under the Customs Programme. This team will benefit from a dedicated budget and resources and build on the methodology and success of one of its most productive and operational expert teams³³. The evolution of the project group to this new expert team will ensure that coordinated customs action is more flexible, both thematically and geographically. It will be based on improved operational cooperation, not only in ports, but also at other borders (land, air). This is because an effective approach against drug trafficking requires the deployment of coordinated EU action covering all modes of transport. This approach would also contribute to more efficient operational cooperation with third countries and other law enforcement authorities.

Furthermore, **as from 2024**, the Commission will use the **Customs Control Equipment Instrument (CCEI) programme**³⁴ to support this EU priority by allocating **more than EUR 200 million** to fund state-of-the-art equipment that can help customs authorities scan

³² Regulation (EU) 2021/444 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2021 establishing the Customs programme for cooperation in the field of customs (OJ L 87, 15.3.2021).

³³ CELBET (Customs Eastern and South-Eastern Land Borders Expert Team) is a Member States` expert team gathering the 11 eastern and south-eastern land borders Member States (BG, FI, EE, EL, HR, HU, LT, LV, PL, SK, RO), and financed under the Customs programme. It has been particularly effective in delivering operational solutions on the ground, has proven experience in collaborating with other law enforcement authorities and ultimately ensures that customs controls are performed in a harmonised way at the land border of the EU.

³⁴ Regulation (EU) 2021/1077 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing, as part of the Integrated Border Management Fund, the instrument for financial support for customs control equipment (OJ L 234, 2.7.2021).

containers and other means of transport, thereby increasing the effectiveness of customs risk management and controls related to illicit drugs and drug precursors. This includes support for the customs laboratories that will also be given equipment to analyse drugs and address the increasing challenges of designer precursors.

Action 2: Strengthening law enforcement operations in ports

Main actors: Member States, Commission, European Anti-Fraud Office, Europol, Eurojust, EPPO

A successful approach to drug trafficking does not stop at logistic hubs or any other part of the drug supply chain. As the EU collectively increases its effectiveness in the early detection of illicit drugs, it is vital to **ensure that drug trafficking is thoroughly investigated and prosecuted to show that this crime does not pay**. This can be done by going after the perpetrators and the networks of which they are part. Coordinated law enforcement is vital to investigate the criminal networks behind the seizures. In some cases, for example, police authorities could opt to monitor containers for surveillance purposes in coordination with customs, rather than seizing the content immediately. Another possibility is to launch digital investigations to detect possible abuses of software control systems used in ports. Moreover, law enforcement authorities could investigate corruption allegations, including by acting as a point of contact for whistle-blowers.

The Commission will continue to support **EMPACT** and its operations as the platform for a holistic approach to drug trafficking. The Commission will also keep promoting cooperation in EMPACT as one of the major catalysts in developing the European Ports Alliance.

In EMPACT, there are two operational priorities where police and customs work together to fight drug trafficking: **cannabis, cocaine and heroin (CCH) and synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances (SYN-NPS)**. Here, law enforcement authorities continue to investigate and share intelligence on drug production and detection, trafficking routes, and drug trafficking networks' methods which can be operationalised into targeting criteria and risk profiles. Measures include a more structured and systematic sharing of the relevant risk information, strengthening the strategic and tactical intelligence picture of the abuse of legal business structures, detecting and dismantling clandestine laboratories involved in the production and export of synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances, and implementing specific cross-border operations targeting the movements of cocaine, cannabis, heroin, synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances. Given the global nature of drug trafficking, the Commission coordinates, encourages and supports international participation around these two priorities. Currently, 18 non-EU countries are active in CCH and 13 in SYN-NPS. In 2024-2025, the Commission will boost cooperation by providing **additional support to further integrate non-EU countries** into these two priorities. The active involvement of Member States' as well as third countries' customs authorities will be indispensable.

The Commission will also continue to support and develop the two networks of laboratories (the **Customs Laboratories European Network** and the **European Network of Forensic Science Institutes**). These laboratories help police and customs in their investigations and controls and will encourage increasing labs' cooperation with law enforcement. Moreover, technologies stemming from the EU Horizon 2020 projects equip law enforcement with new capabilities, allowing for more effective detection of illicit drugs and precursors at the borders³⁵.

Action 3: A public-private partnership against drug smuggling and criminal infiltration

Main actors: Commission, Member States, Europol, EMCDDA, public and private stakeholders

Many public and private players, from **port authorities to shipping companies and other service providers**, play a crucial role in protecting **ports' security**. They are the first point of contact in the fight against drug smuggling and criminal infiltration. This is because they use processes, systems and equipment that could help identify insider threats throughout maritime supply chains, from locating the origin of shipments, to transit and transshipment hubs, up to the final destination. Port authorities and private shipping companies need to be aware of their role in the fight against drug trafficking and criminal infiltration. They should have the necessary tools to track containers and to secure port areas with cameras, sensors and scanners. They should also have the means to properly screen and vet their employees to avoid attempted corruption by criminal networks.

However, they cannot do it alone. To avoid drug trafficking and criminal infiltration, the EU needs to join forces. **Bringing together the private sector and law enforcement authorities** can contribute to identifying and implementing operational and concrete solutions to prevent criminal networks infiltrating EU ports and exploiting them for drug trafficking. In this context, the Commission advocates for a full and thorough implementation and enforcement of the relevant EU legislation³⁶ (including security vetting of or background checks on key staff).

To strengthen the resilience of logistic hubs, the Commission will bring together all relevant public and private actors into a **public-private partnership**: Member States, local authorities, law enforcement authorities, including customs, EU agencies and private operators in the ports. Drawing from the expertise and experience of the public and private sector, the Alliance will promote best practices and due diligence. It will put in place coordinated measures to step up efforts to tackle drug trafficking and protect logistic hubs from criminal infiltration. The work of the Alliance will include a focus on the exchange of strategic and operational information. The Commission will reflect on how to exchange information most effectively between members of the Alliance.

³⁵ Border detection of illicit drugs and precursors by highly accurate electrosensors | BorderSens | Project | Fact sheet | H2020 | CORDIS | European Commission (europa.eu)

³⁶ See Regulation (EC) No 725/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 31 March 2004 on enhancing ship and port facility security, OJ L29/6 and Directive 2005/65/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of 26 October 2005 on enhancing port security (OJ L310/28).

3.2. Dismantling high-risk criminal networks

Criminal networks have rapidly evolved to pursue large financial gains. The increasing complexity and flexibility of the criminal landscape makes investigations into organised crime particularly challenging, as one member of a network can easily be replaced by others when apprehended. Moreover, criminal networks use sophisticated techniques to hide their assets from detection. They use the services of high-level brokers, who run parallel underground systems, such as hawala, that are outside of the formal financial system³⁷.

As set out in the EU organised crime strategy, to make a real difference in the fight against organised crime, **criminal networks must be dismantled as such**. This requires an improved intelligence picture; specialised well-trained services with the right tools; effective, targeted and coordinated action by law enforcement and judicial authorities; and a robust legal framework against organised crime under which to operate.

Action 4: Mapping the criminal networks that pose the biggest threats to society

Main actors: Commission, Member States, Europol, Eurojust, CEPOL

To have the greatest impact, law enforcement and judicial authorities should pay specific attention to **those networks that pose the biggest threats to our society and the public**. These high-risk criminal networks use corruption, infiltrate the legal economy, commit acts of violence, including intimidation, and run parallel underground financial systems.

To target these criminal organisations, a paradigm shift is needed: **moving away from a focus on individual criminals and specific crimes to investigating and prosecuting networks as a whole**. The **new priority, high-risk criminal networks, in EMPACT** has laid the foundation for this joint work, which brings together law enforcement and judicial authorities of EU Member States and international partners (including 37 non-EU countries in 2023), with the support of EU institutions, agencies and bodies.

As the next step, Europol, with the support of Member States, will conduct **a mapping exercise in early 2024 to identify the criminal networks** that pose the biggest threats, whether they are operating in EU or non-EU countries. This will also help identify key members or enablers of high-risk criminal networks. The mapping will considerably **improve the intelligence picture** of crime, which will feed into dedicated threat assessments and help prioritise investigations. The mapping should be **regularly updated** so authorities are aware of changes in networks' activities and methods. Furthermore, the Commission, Member States and Europol should work in EMPACT to develop **common indicators and assessments** to allow for the comparability of data by 2025. In addition, the Commission will explore possibilities for the EU to create synergies with Interpol's criminal intelligence analysis.

³⁷ [The Other Side of the Coin: An Analysis of Financial and Economic Crime | Europol \(europa.eu\)](#)

Action 5: A network of specialised prosecutors and judges to dismantle criminal networks

Main actors: Eurojust, Europol, Member States.

Criminal networks and their illicit activities often **span different jurisdictions**, but this is not always known at the start of investigations in one Member State. Even if investigators are aware of the geographical range of the criminal network, they are faced with **practical obstacles**. These obstacles include difficulties in identifying their counterparts in other Member States or insufficient awareness of specific rules in other Member States, for example on the conditions for carrying out investigative measures.

To dismantle criminal networks and their business models across the EU, authorities must **build trust and connections** to exchange information early on and launch parallel investigations in those Member States where links are identified. Throughout the proceedings, a regular dialogue between the judicial authorities involved is essential to ensure investigative strategies are aligned and to speed up the cross-border gathering of evidence.

To strengthen the exchange of information and cooperation between judicial authorities on **complex cross-border investigations** into organised crime, a **network of specialised prosecutors and judges from Member States should be created with the support of Eurojust**. The network will be a centre of specialised expertise supporting judicial authorities and facilitating the exchange of expertise, best practices and other knowledge on investigating and prosecuting organised crime. They will foster dialogue among the different national authorities involved, provide a forum to discuss legal and practical problems and promote using Eurojust in cross-border organised crime cases.

Action 6: Facilitating financial investigations

Main actors: Commission, Member States, Europol, Eurojust, CEPOL

Since the priority of organised crime is to make a profit, the **‘follow-the-money’ approach** is the most effective way of depriving criminals of their large illicit gains. In the Council Conclusions on enhancing financial investigations to fight serious and organised crime³⁸, Member States committed to **improving financial investigations** as a crucial part of the fight against organised crime. The upcoming adoption by the European Parliament and the Council of the Commission proposal on **confiscation and asset recovery** will boost systematic financial investigations. These investigations will be facilitated by the recent agreement on the **interconnection of bank account registries** as well as by the strengthened **rules on anti-money laundering**. Once the AML/CFT legislative package is adopted, the future Anti-money Laundering Authority (AMLA) will provide operational support to Financial Intelligence Units when carrying joint analyses. This will contribute to a more effective detection and analysis of cross-border cases.

³⁸ ST 8927/20, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8927-2020-INIT/en/pdf>.

As a complement to anti-money laundering rules, some Member States have set up **public-private partnerships** enabling the **exchange of operational information among authorities and banks and financial and credit institutions**. These partnerships help private bodies, which are at the forefront of identifying illicit financial flows among billions of daily transactions, to detect difficult-to-find activity. To facilitate the development of this type of cooperation across Member States, Europol's Financial Intelligence Public-Private Partnership will develop, within the limits of Europol's mandate, a **blueprint** summarising the legal frameworks and practical steps taken in Member States and third countries **to set up partnerships against money laundering** by mid-2024. This blueprint should take into account the best practices and legal considerations set out in the Commission's staff working document on this subject³⁹ and the outcome of the negotiations on the anti-money laundering package. It should in particular build on the steps already taken by Member States to ensure that the exchange of personal data is limited to what is necessary and proportionate to the purpose of preventing, detecting and investigating money laundering offences and the safeguards set out to protect personal data.

Law enforcement authorities should use **parallel financial investigations** more systematically when investigating organised crime. However, carrying out complex financial investigations requires specialised expertise, capacity and technological tools. **Europol's Financial and Economic Crime Centre**, which in 2022 supported over 400 financial investigations⁴⁰, and Eurojust, which provides competent authorities with guidelines and best practices on the recovery of illicit assets are key in supporting Member States. In particular, the Centre can provide valuable support to joint activities on investigations into underground banking. Furthermore, **CEPOL's training capabilities** can help Member States increase the skills and expertise of law enforcement in financial investigations.

Building the financial profile of a criminal network requires putting together and analysing different sources of information, including information on crypto assets, which are often used by drug trafficking groups to hide their financial trail. It also requires harmonising the different formats of the data collected, identifying entities in unstructured datasets and cross matching a large number of subjects. Some Member States, such as Latvia, Slovenia and Spain, have developed or are developing their own **tools for financial transaction analysis** to this effect. The **ma³tch tool in FIU.net**, hosted and managed by the Commission since 2021, allows Financial Intelligence Units to crossmatch information (e.g., concerning transactions) in a pseudonymised way and enables them to establish in real time if a subject is already known by another unit. If this is the case, information can be exchanged, and cases built together. Financial Intelligence Units are strongly encouraged to make full use of the FIU.net's ma³tch functionality.

³⁹ Commission staff working document on the use of public-private partnerships in the framework of preventing and fighting money laundering and terrorist financing, Brussels, 27.10.2022 (SWD/2022. 347 final).

⁴⁰ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/about-europol/european-financial-and-economic-crime-centre-efecc>

Additionally, under the **Horizon Europe programme**, the Commission will publish a call for research and innovation on security in June 2024 that will provide further funding opportunities for the development and uptake of specific tools to conduct effective financial investigations⁴¹.

Action 7: Facilitating digital investigations

Main actors: Commission, Member States, Europol, Eurojust, CEPOL

As our everyday activities move online more than ever, so do illegal activities. Investigators are faced with the reality that criminals have been quick to exploit the possibilities offered by the online world and continue to use more and more advanced technologies to achieve their aims. Therefore, the Commission seeks to explore several strands of work to respond to these developments. The **High-Level Group on access to data for effective law enforcement** was launched by the Commission in June 2023⁴². The High-Level Group brings together law enforcement and judicial authorities, data protection, privacy and cybersecurity experts, the private sector, non-governmental organisations and academia. The group explores challenges that law enforcement practitioners face in their daily work and potential solutions to overcome them, with the aim of ensuring the adequate access to data, to fight crime and enhance public security in the digital age. The group **will issue a report in 2024** with technical, operational or legal recommendations.

The Commission is also helping increase the **capacity of Member States' authorities to carry out digital investigations** by supporting the European Cybercrime Training and Education Group⁴³ in developing training resources. This group has trained at least 1 000 police officers in the last 3 years. Furthermore, the Commission funds the European Anti-Cybercrime Technology Development Association⁴⁴ to develop digital tools to support investigations, which are then made available for free to EU law enforcement authorities and Europol. Eurojust supports the fight against cybercrime through the European Judicial Cybercrime Network with strategic support and best practices.

Drug trafficking itself also takes place online both on darknet markets and on the clearnet, including through social media. There are significant challenges to tackle this kind of trafficking. The Commission will work to address online drug trafficking, including through collaboration with the private sector through the **EU Internet Forum**. The Forum will deliver a **knowledge package** in 2024 aimed at supporting social media companies in better moderating drugs content on their platforms. Furthermore, the Commission will develop an **IT tool** in 2024 to help law

⁴¹<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/horizon-cl3-2024-fct-01-08>

⁴² COM/2023/3647 final

⁴³ <https://www.ecteg.eu/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.eactda.eu/>

enforcement authorities **monitor the darknet** to counter drug trafficking⁴⁵. Finally, under the Horizon Europe Programme, the Commission will fund a security research project using Artificial Intelligence in fighting illicit drugs production and trafficking as of November 2023.

Action 8: Unlocking the potential of Schengen Information System alerts

Main actors: Commission, Member States, Europol

The exchange of operational information across borders is vital to detect and apprehend criminals. The features of the Schengen Information System (SIS) – by a new legal framework that has entered into force in March 2023⁴⁶ – help prevent criminals and terrorists from moving within or entering the EU undetected. The upgraded SIS includes new categories of alerts and biometrics (such as palm prints, finger marks and DNA records) to correctly identify people travelling under a false identity and information about the cars or other objects they are using. New alerts on persons and objects for discreet checks, inquiry checks or specific checks enable authorities to collect targeted information on suspects of serious or organised crime or terrorism.

Additionally, Europol’s recently strengthened mandate permits the agency to support Member States in processing data transmitted by non-EU countries or international organisations. Europol may also propose that Member States enter information alerts in the SIS⁴⁷.

Member States are therefore strongly encouraged to make full use of the tools available in SIS to fight serious and organised crime. In particular, it is crucial that Member States issue alerts on members or enablers of high-risk criminal networks in the system and report hits to Europol. In March 2023, the Commission launched a **study to explore, assess and propose various options** to innovate the exchange of supplementary information on SIS alerts by the national offices (the SIRENE Bureaux) to allow for a better use of this information. In 2026, the Commission will carry out an overall evaluation of the central SIS, the supplementary information exchange between national authorities, including an assessment of the automated fingerprint identification system, and SIS information campaigns.

Action 9: Towards a more robust legal framework against organised crime

Main actors: Commission, European Parliament, Council, High Representative

⁴⁵ Implementing the preparatory action on the EU-coordinated darknet monitoring to counter criminal activities proposed by the European Parliament, with the involvement of the EMCDDA as well as Europol, in line with the EU drugs strategy and action plan.

⁴⁶ Regulation (EU) 2018/1862 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 November 2018 on the establishment, operation and use of the Schengen Information System (SIS) in the field of police cooperation and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, amending and repealing Council Decision 2007/533/JHA, and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1986/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Commission Decision 2010/261/EU (OJ L 312 7.12.2018, p. 56).

⁴⁷ Regulation (EU) 2022/991 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 8 June 2022 amending Regulation (EU) 2016/794, as regards Europol’s cooperation with private parties, the processing of personal data by Europol in support of criminal investigations, and Europol’s role in research and innovation (OJ L 169, 27.6.2022, p. 1).

An effective EU legal framework is essential to provide law enforcement and judicial authorities with the necessary tools to fight organised crime. A study published in February 2023 assessing the effectiveness of the 2008 Framework Decision on Organised Crime⁴⁸ highlighted **wide divergences among Member States in the offences, penalties and investigative tools** related to participating in a criminal organisation. These differences create obstacles in cross-border cooperation and can discourage authorities from investigating criminal networks and their members.

To address the identified shortcomings, the Commission will work with Member States, the European Parliament, EU agencies and bodies and other stakeholders to strengthen the **legal framework against organised crime** and its implementation. An assessment of the existing legal framework will also need to look at **harmonised legal definitions** of organised crime and adapt them to the reality of criminal networks and their key members to ensure **dissuasive sanctions** for participating in or running a criminal organisation. In order for the competent authorities to better detect and investigate organised criminal activities, the review should explore measures that ensure authorities have the appropriate **special investigative techniques** at their disposal. A reflection should take place about the need for additional measures, such as **national organised crime strategies**, as well as **specialised units** with expertise from several disciplines to tackle complex investigations. Furthermore, the review should explore whether measures at EU level would be necessary to facilitate the collaboration of **crown witnesses**.

Specifically on drug trafficking, the **Council Framework Decision 2004/757/JHA laying down minimum provisions on the constituent elements of criminal acts and penalties in the field of illicit drug trafficking**⁴⁹ will be evaluated in 2024. The rules, especially those on criminal sanctions, could be amended, modernised and strengthened.

Further reflections should take place at EU level on whether other measures could be relevant that limit the ability of members of criminal networks to access the EU's internal market. Certain measures, which have been applied by third countries, could be a valuable complement to law enforcement efforts, cutting off criminals from the funds that allow them to infiltrate the economy and limiting their capacity to operate across borders, especially when the suspect is located outside the EU.

3.3.Prevention

The Commission considers **crime prevention to be an integral part of a long-term response to combating organised crime**. The EU's policy on crime prevention focuses on creating technical or administrative barriers that prevent individuals from committing a crime. In

⁴⁸ Council Framework Decision 2008/841/JHA of 24 October 2008 on the fight against organised crime (OJ L 300, 11.11.2008).

⁴⁹ Council Framework Decision 2004/757/JHA of 25 October 2004 laying down minimum provisions on the constituent elements of criminal acts and penalties in the field of illicit drug trafficking (OJ L 335, 11.11.2004, p. 8).

addition, it promotes exchanges of experience and best practices to mitigate factors that encourage crime and recidivism, including efforts to prevent people from ending up in vulnerable situations that may lead them to criminal behaviour. Prevention is an integral part of the EU's security policy, covering drugs⁵⁰, corruption⁵¹, cybercrime⁵² and many other areas.

A **multidisciplinary and inter-agency approach** to crime prevention should include close cooperation with local authorities and civil society. This can contribute to reducing the likelihood of criminal activity by building barriers, raising the awareness of potential victims and supporting vulnerable individuals and communities to reduce the risk of falling into crime. The Commission supports Member States and local policymakers and practitioners in **promoting evidence-based policies and tools to prevent crime**. The Commission also stresses the need for policymakers and practitioners at EU, national and local levels to **connect and exchange information** through clearly designated and well-established dissemination and communication channels.

Action 10: Preventing organised crime activities through administrative measures

Main actors: Commission, Member States, Europol, European Network on the Administrative Approach

More than 80% of the criminal networks active today in the EU use legal business structures for their criminal activities⁵³. For example, they set up small businesses to launder their illicit gains or compete in public tenders, defrauding public institutions. Therefore, it is vital that **administrative authorities are aware** of the major role they can play in combating organised crime. In addition, **suitable procedures must be put in place** at national and local levels to shut down a business, perform background checks before granting permits, tenders and subsidies and put in place other barriers, such as inspections (for example health or labour inspections) that prevent criminals from committing a crime.

Several Member States have well-developed frameworks in place where local authorities are **empowered to use administrative tools to prevent the criminal infiltration** of legal businesses and administrative infrastructure. In other Member States, however, the **administrative approach** is still underdeveloped. Moreover, differences in national frameworks and practices complicate cross-border collaboration, resulting in criminals simply crossing the border to set up new fraudulent businesses if their previous business is closed by the authorities.

Therefore, the exchange of best practices and guidance among all Member States should be further strengthened to help Member States set up national frameworks to apply the administrative approach. The Commission will **develop practical guidance in 2024** on the use

⁵⁰ COM/2020/ 606 final.

⁵¹ COM/2023/ 234 final.

⁵² https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/cybercrime_en

⁵³ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/socta-report>

of administrative tools and the exchange of information in the fight against criminal infiltration. This work will draw on the experience of the EU Regional Information and Expertise Centre⁵⁴ (an EU-funded project supporting the cross-border administrative approach between Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands), the European Network on the Administrative Approach⁵⁵ and EMPACT.

The administrative approach is one of EMPACT's nine common horizontal strategic goals. The Commission strongly encourages Member States and Europol to carry out specific operational measures in 2024 and 2025 that contribute to this goal.

Action 11: Combating the proliferation of designer precursors

Main actors: Commission, European Parliament, Council, EMCDDA

Criminals use and divert chemicals needed in the production of everyday products for the manufacture of illegal drugs. In order to limit and control access to these drug precursors, the EU has already put rules in place.⁵⁶ However, criminals can easily circumvent the existing controls for these substances by creating ever new designer precursors: close chemical relatives of traditional drug precursors. They are made to circumvent customs controls and do not have any known legitimate use.

The existing EU legislative framework on drug precursors⁵⁷ follows a time consuming 'substance-by-substance scheduling' approach, which makes it difficult to keep up with the speed of innovation of organised crime. Each time a new substance is identified as drug precursor and subsequently scheduled for control and monitoring, organised crime groups respond by altering the molecular structure slightly and create a new designer precursor. This can be done much faster than the time it takes to schedule (control) a substance.

Therefore, as from 2024, the Commission plans to set out innovative ways for **speeding up and broadening the existing approach of scheduling drug precursors**. The range of scheduled substances will be extended to clearly identified derivatives and related chemicals that can easily be converted to or used as substitutes during illicit production. On the timing of scheduling. In addition, the Commission will make every effort to fast-track the adoption procedure of future delegated acts that schedule additional substances, by working hand in hand with the European Parliament and the Council. The Commission will propose implementing this new approach to

⁵⁴ [EURIEC](#).

⁵⁵ [Homepage - European Network on the Administrative Approach](#).

⁵⁶ Council Regulation (EC) No 111/2005 of 22 December 2004 laying down rules for the monitoring of trade between the Community and third countries in drug precursors, OJ L 22, 26.1.2005, p. 1–10, and Regulation (EC) No 273/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 February 2004 on drug precursors, OJ L47, 18.2.2004.

⁵⁷ Council Regulation (EC) No 111/2005 of 22 December 2004 laying down rules for the monitoring of trade between the Community and third countries in drug precursors, (OJ L 22, 26.1.2005, p. 1–10), and Regulation (EC) No 273/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 February 2004 on drug precursors, (OJ L47, 18.2.2004).

the fullest extent possible within the existing EU legal framework when scheduling additional substances.

At a later stage, following an in-depth examination of the issues at stake and possible solutions, and building on the outcome of the evaluation of the EU drug precursors regulations,⁵⁸ the Commission may **review these regulations**⁵⁹ also with a view to tackle the identified issues of designer precursors. The Commission supports international efforts and will continue to do so in the future. The EU has been pursuing stronger multilateral cooperation on and awareness raising about the challenges posed by non-scheduled substances, particularly designer precursors. The EU is also closely monitoring and contributing to the work of the United Nations' Commission on Narcotic Drugs, which regularly reviews and analyses the global drug situation. The EU will continue to work closely with the **International Narcotics Control Board** and like-minded countries that are taking in its pursuit of concrete action against this phenomenon. It is vital to increase responsiveness, as currently, criminals have ample time to figure out how to circumvent controls.

Action 12: Preventing criminal networks from recruiting children and young people

Main actors: Commission, Member States (including local authorities), EMCDDA, European Crime Prevention Network, civil society organisations

Criminal networks, including drug traffickers, exploit vulnerable people and use young people or even children to carry out criminal activities. These activities include burglaries, shoplifting, emptying containers filled with drugs, placing explosives, committing online fraud, or 'lending' bank accounts. In search of easy money, young people are tempted to drop out of school or employment. To protect young people and disrupt criminal activity, **it is essential to invest in effective crime prevention policies and tools.**

Crime prevention involves **local communities, families, schools, the social welfare sector, civil society, law enforcement, the judiciary, prison authorities and the private sector.** The effective use of EU and national resources to improve social cohesion, address unemployment and ensure that young people do not abandon their education is very relevant in this context. Through the European Social Fund+, the Commission will continue to help vulnerable young people reach their potential by supporting local initiatives to combat poverty, social inclusion and youth unemployment, in line with the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights⁶⁰.

Building on the experience of the European Crime Prevention Network, the Radicalisation Awareness Network and EMPACT, the Commission will strengthen the exchange of knowledge

⁵⁸ COM/2020/ 768 final.

⁵⁹ Council Regulation (EC) No 111/2005 of 22 December 2004 laying down rules for the monitoring of trade between the Community and third countries in drug precursors (OJ L 22, 26.1.2005, p. 1–) and Regulation (EC) No 273/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 February 2004 on drug precursors (OJ L47, 18.2.2004)..

⁶⁰ COM/2017/ 250 final.

and best practices on crime prevention. Along with Member States, the EU Crime Prevention Network and other stakeholders, the Commission will bring crime prevention practitioners and policymakers together for a **high-level conference on crime prevention in 2024** and present a collection of **best practices on preventing recruitment in organised crime**.

Action 13: Improving public safety and public health in areas affected by the use and sale of drugs and drug-related crime.

Main actors: Commission, Member States, EMCDDA

In several EU countries, drug-related criminal hubs have been developing. Some locations, such as urban neighbourhoods, train and metro stations and urban wastelands, are particularly affected by **the sale of drugs, drug use and drug-related crimes**. This is due to many **factors**, including poverty and social exclusion. This leads to insecurity for local communities, and people using drugs in these areas continue to suffer from health problems, stigma and social harm. The challenges posed by this concentration of illicit activities cannot be resolved by local authorities alone and require sustainable solutions.

Due to significant differences in local, regional and national situations, targeted solutions must be identified that combine a law enforcement response with social and health measures. It is crucial to create a space for the exchange of best practices and evidence-based approaches between those concerned. The Commission, with the support of the EMCDDA, will organise a **high-level conference in 2024**, bringing together law enforcement, health and social professionals and local authorities, including health services, to draw up best practices. As part of EMPACT, joint action and training will be held based on the EMCDDA's European Prevention Curriculum⁶¹.

3.4. International cooperation

The global reach of criminal networks and their interconnectedness has made it more urgent for the **EU to look beyond its borders for comprehensive solutions**. In the fight against drug trafficking, priority is given to cooperation with those countries and regions in which the main drug supply routes run and that are particularly affected by the adverse effects of drug trafficking. Cooperation with key partners that can help provide solutions is also crucial. EU's external action and partnerships are comprehensive, focusing on both prevention and the fight against organised crime.

The EU should continue to improve law enforcement and judicial cooperation with those countries whose national legal frameworks are abused by criminals in order to hide themselves

⁶¹ https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/manuals/european-prevention-curriculum_en

or their assets. Moreover, under the umbrella of the **Global Gateway Strategy**⁶², the EU will continue to invest in partners' infrastructure needs, notably plugging vulnerabilities in logistic hubs through dedicated Team Europe Initiatives that also support security and technological enhancement.

As regards the **protection of ports** against criminal infiltration, in its engagement with non-EU countries, the Commission stresses the importance of them adhering fully to the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Convention (especially the special measures to improve maritime security) and the International Ship and Port Facility (ISPS) Code⁶³.

Action 14: Strengthening support to operational anti-drug trafficking operations in West Africa

Main EU actors: Commission, Member States, MAOC (N), Europol.

The Gulf of Guinea has become one of the **major drug trafficking routes** from South America. Drugs make their way to Europe through the Gulf of Guinea in fishing vessels, pleasure crafts, sailing boats and other types of ships leaving South America. These vessels load their illicit cargo off the coast and sail towards the Gulf of Guinea to deliver the drugs to other ships. These ships then bring the shipment to shore, and from there, the drugs are smuggled across the Sahara Desert into Europe.

In line with the EU Maritime Security Strategy for evolving maritime threats and the action plan⁶⁴ and the EU strategy on the Gulf of Guinea⁶⁵, the Commission, together with EU Member States, will work to tackle this drug-supply route in a coordinated way. They will do so by exchanging information, strengthening the national maritime presence in the area, facilitating joint operations with the support of the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre – Narcotics (MAOC (N)) and further **supporting the development of Western African countries' capacity to fight drug trafficking**, for instance through the Global Illicit Flows Programme (GIFP).

The upcoming maritime security programme “**Enhancing maritime security in Africa**” (**Safe Seas for Africa**) aims to strengthen the capacities of law enforcement agencies to tackle trafficking of narcotics at sea, both in the Gulf of Guinea region, as well as along the Swahili coast and in the island region of the Western Indian Ocean.

Furthermore, for West Africa, the EU is in the process of exploring a **potential future regional intervention guided by a comprehensive ‘trafficking corridors and hubs’ approach**. Such a program would further contribute to stabilization efforts, notably by addressing potential existing connections between organized crime and the proliferation of terrorist activities in West Africa.

⁶² JOIN/2021/30 final

⁶³ [SOLAS XI-2 and the ISPS Code \(imo.org\)](https://www.imo.org).

⁶⁴ The revised EUMSS has been sent to the Council for its endorsement.

⁶⁵ EU Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea, 17 March 2014, Council of the European Union <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/28734/141582.pdf>

Action 15: Boosting EU cooperation with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean in the fight against organised crime

Main EU actors: Commission, Europol, Eurojust, Member States.

As the criminal threats faced by Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the EU seriously affect the security and well-being of people in both regions, we must join forces to fight the threat. As a matter of priority, to improve law enforcement cooperation with Latin America, the Commission is negotiating **international agreements on the exchange of personal data with Europol** with Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru. The Commission is also intensifying work to conclude negotiations on **international judicial cooperation agreements with Eurojust** with Brazil, Argentina and Colombia. The Commission will also consider proposing to extend the Council's mandate in particular to other Latin American countries for Eurojust's future engagement on judicial cooperation in the region.

As part of the strengthened EU-LAC partnership on Justice and Security and its Team Europe Initiative, there are regional programmes that support integrated border management efforts and the fight against trafficking and smuggling of human beings in several South American countries⁶⁶ (EUROFRONT) as well as reducing the supply and demand of drugs in Latin America and the Caribbean (COPOLAD) and the Global Illicit Flows Programme, which seeks to build capacity to combat organised crime across Latin America and the Caribbean (among other regions). High-level dialogue will also be enhanced through the EU-CELAC Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism on Drugs. In this regard, the **new edition of EL PAcCTO 2.0** will provide additional resources to strengthen law enforcement cooperation between the EU and Latin American and Caribbean countries, including support to AMERIPOL. As part of EL PAcCTO 2.0., a joint project will support and strengthen the exchange of information and intelligence, streamline operations, and maximise the use of data between Europol and Colombia to disrupt criminal drug trafficking networks. Following the Team Europe approach, the Commission will also explore possibilities to support **local special investigative teams** to carry out complex investigations in non-EU countries.

In 2022, 44 tonnes of cocaine were seized in Guayaquil in Ecuador. Ports in the Guayaquil area have become one of the most used logistic hubs to traffic drugs to Europe via containers. Together with national authorities, the Commission will launch a **specific assessment of the vulnerabilities of the ports of Guayaquil** and its bay area to prioritise future activities, including EU support.

Action 16: Forging alliances to address synthetic drug threats

Main actors: Commission, Europol, EMCDDA and Member States

⁶⁶ Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil.

Synthetic drugs can be manufactured easily and rapidly all around the world in large quantities and from cheap chemicals. Synthetic drugs have proliferated in the last decade at international and regional levels and **pose a real threat** to health and safety. There is also a growing concern over the production of synthetic drugs in Europe, which are exported around the world. The EU should therefore take responsibility and contribute to countering this phenomenon, particularly by seeking out international partners. Exchanging information and sharing experiences is highly valuable, especially with North American countries where fentanyl-related problems are most prevalent. The EU needs to increase preparedness and put in place robust surveillance measures.

On 7 July 2023, the Commission confirmed that the EU would join the **Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats** launched by the United States. The Commission and the High Representative, together with the relevant EU agencies and Member States, will contribute to the Coalition's work to improve global surveillance capacity, strengthen preparedness for the challenges from the manufacture and trafficking of synthetic drugs and develop approaches to reduce drug demand and drug-related harm. The Commission also supports US efforts to present a UN General Assembly resolution on synthetic drugs for endorsement in December 2023.

The Commission will also hold further exchanges with **China, in particular via the EU Dialogue on Drugs**, to boost cooperation on illicit drugs production and the diversion and trafficking of drug precursors and other essential chemicals for the illicit manufacture of drugs. Alongside the next EU-China Dialogue on Drugs to be held in 2024, the Commission intends to resume mutual administrative assistance as part of the **EU-China Joint Follow-up Group on Precursors** to exchange information. This will also help prevent the diversion of precursors and chemical substances frequently used in the manufacture of illicit drugs traded between the EU and China.

Action 17: Strengthening law enforcement and judicial cooperation with uncooperative jurisdictions

Main actors: Commission, Member States

Modern criminal networks are cross border in nature. They use international commercial routes to traffic all sorts of illegal goods and exploit the gaps between jurisdictions to traffic drugs and conceal and launder their vast criminal revenue⁶⁷. At the same time, uncooperative jurisdictions are used as safe havens for high-value fugitives to escape investigation and prosecution. Moreover, those who run underground banking systems usually hide in countries where police and judicial cooperation with the EU is complex and where they can enjoy a high standard of living.

⁶⁷ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/socta-report>

Recent major investigations, such as the successful Operation Desert Light supported by Europol in November 2022⁶⁸, have also shown **the crucial need for effective judicial cooperation with non-EU countries** to ensure that apprehended criminals are extradited, prosecuted and convicted. It is therefore essential to **strengthen law enforcement and judicial cooperation with non-EU countries**. Particular attention should be paid to extradition, financial investigations and the recovery of criminal assets outside the EU, including through close cooperation of Member States' or EU Agency liaison officers posted in non-EU countries. To step up coordination, maximise the EU's impact and improve engagement with non-EU countries, the creation and deployment of EU law enforcement and judicial liaison officers in key non-EU countries should be considered.

Alongside improved operational activities, it is also important to have a common legal framework for effective criminal law cooperation at international level. The Commission in its engagement with non-EU countries invites them to become parties to the Council of Europe conventions in the area of mutual legal assistance⁶⁹ extradition⁷⁰ and freezing and confiscation⁷¹.

The Commission will work on identifying the current issues faced by Member States with non-EU countries to combine diplomatic efforts for more effective cooperation that is in line with EU fundamental rights standards. Furthermore, the Commission will explore the possibility to launch negotiations to conclude specific **EU extradition agreements**, where the preconditions for the conclusion of such agreements are fulfilled.

3.5. Working together and providing support

Since the adoption of the EU strategies, the Commission, Member States and EU agencies and bodies have met regularly to build a multidisciplinary community of policymakers and practitioners and engage in a regular dialogue. The Commission will continue to work with all stakeholders on the implementation of the organised crime strategy and the actions presented in this Communication to exchange best practices, facilitate sharing information and operational cooperation and reflect on future needs.

Furthermore, the Commission has mobilised funding to support the fight against organised crime with dedicated EU funding for 2023-2025. It will organise calls for proposals under the **Internal Security Fund** on several topics, including corruption, digital investigations, and support to EMPACT. In particular, the Commission will launch a **call for proposals on organised crime for a total of EUR 20 million by the end of 2023**.

⁶⁸ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/heat-rising-european-super-cartel-taken-down-in-six-countries>

⁶⁹ Council of Europe Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance (ETS No 30), <https://rm.coe.int/16800656ce>

⁷⁰ Council of Europe Convention on Extradition (ETS No 24), <https://rm.coe.int/1680064587>

⁷¹ Council of Europe Convention on Laundering, Search, Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime and on the Financing of Terrorism (CTS No 198), <https://rm.coe.int/168008371>

4. CONCLUSIONS

The scale, sophistication and violent consequences of organised crime have become a serious threat to the EU's security. As criminal networks' methods become more sophisticated, so should the EU's: **the response to dismantle these networks needs to be stepped up urgently.** This document therefore has set out key actions needed at EU level to intensify the fight against high-risk criminal networks and drug trafficking. Work on fully implementing the EU strategies on organised crime and drugs should continue at full speed. The Commission commits to implementing these additional actions in 2024 and 2025, in close cooperation with Member States and EU agencies and bodies.

Common, robust and effective rules are essential to boost national measures, as well as EU and international cooperation against organised crime and drug trafficking and to protect victims of these crimes. The **Commission invites the European Parliament and the Council to adopt** by the end of the legislature the **Confiscation and Asset Recovery Directive**, the **revision of the Prüm Regulation**, the **rules on the interconnection of bank account registries**, the **proposed anti-money-laundering legislative package**, and the **draft Directive on combating corruption by criminal law**. The Commission reiterates its commitment to work closely with the co-legislators to achieve this aim.

Fighting organised crime and drug trafficking must be a priority for the EU and its Member States. **We must address the threats we face together**, which is why the Commission proposes to the European Parliament and the Council to fully endorse the priorities and medium- to long-term measures set out in this roadmap.