



# DECODING THE EU'S MOST THREATENING CRIMINAL NETWORKS

## Executive Summary

This report is the first of its kind to analyse in depth the characteristics that make criminal actors particularly threatening. Enhancing law enforcement's understanding of their functioning and core capabilities will further strengthen the fight against serious and organised crime. It is essential as a complement to a commodity-based approach.

## Background

The European Union's (EU) internal security continues to be threatened by serious and organised crime. To effectively prioritise resources and guide policy action aimed at addressing this issue, it is essential to build a clear understanding not only of criminal activities but also of those responsible for them. The EU serious and organised crime threat assessments (EU SOCTA) predominantly analyse the criminal landscape through the lens of criminal markets and activities and, in turn, their impact on the EU's economy and society. However, without a comprehensive assessment of criminal networks, the picture is incomplete.

The concept 'criminal network' reflects the nature of the current criminal landscape, which is complex and includes a variety of criminal associations. Criminal networks involve collaboration between groups and individuals – groups of different organisational character, and individuals who are either embedded within a particular network or operate outside of it. This analysis brings to light the characteristics of those criminal networks that pose the highest threat to the EU's internal security. The aim is to strengthen our understanding of criminal networks, in order to help policy makers and law enforcement make informed policy and operational decisions to tackle them.

This report responds to several initiatives that highlight the need to enhance our understanding of what shapes the threat of criminal networks, including by the EU Justice and Home Affairs Ministers and the current Belgian Presidency of the EU Council<sup>1</sup>. The results of the analysis will complement the commodity-based assessment of the EU SOCTA 2025 with a deeper criminal-actor focused analysis. It will also support the EMPACT Operational Action Plan on High-Risk Criminal Networks on developing a methodology to identify the most threatening criminal networks. It is part of the EU roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime under Action 4<sup>2</sup>.

---

1 Belgian presidency, Council of the European Union, Priorities, accessed on 8 February 2024, accessible at <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/priorities/>

2 European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the EU roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime, COM/2023/641 final, 18 October 2023, accessible at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023DC0641>

## A unique dataset

This analysis is based on a unique dataset designed specifically for this purpose and, where relevant, illustrated with additional information already shared with Europol as the European hub for criminal information.

Based on agreed criteria in the context of the EU SOCTA, Member States and Europol's partner countries joined forces to identify the most threatening criminal networks active in and affecting the EU. This resulted in a unique dataset, with extensive information on all relevant aspects that describe them and help assess their threat.

**EU Member States and third countries identified a total of 821 most threatening criminal networks** active in the European Union and affecting the region's internal security<sup>3</sup>. The total membership of the identified networks **exceeds 25 000 individuals**. This overview of 821 most threatening criminal networks is the most comprehensive EU report of its kind, as it is the first to bring together details on these networks' functioning and operations in a uniform manner.

These networks and the suspects they are composed of are **active in a range of crime areas, such as drug trafficking, fraud, property crime, migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, among others**. Drug trafficking clearly stands out as a key activity – **half (50 %) of the most threatening criminal networks are involved in drug trafficking, either as standalone activity or as part of a portfolio of activities. One third (36 %) focus exclusively on drug trafficking**.

## Twofold significance for EU law enforcement

This data has a twofold significance for EU law enforcement. Firstly, the amassed dataset allows for an intelligence-led assessment of criminal networks themselves; their structure, their activities, and their means and area(s) of operation. This in turn has provided unprecedented insights into the key features of these criminal networks and the risks they pose to society. This will strengthen our common understanding, and serve the policymakers and law enforcement bodies looking to tackle such networks.

Secondly, this vast amount of criminal data is now centralised at Europol, further reinforcing the Agency's role as a criminal information hub. It constitutes a pivotal asset in enhancing operational effectiveness, enabling law enforcement to better target and conduct criminal investigations in the framework of cross-border police cooperation. It will allow allocating investigative resources more efficiently and ultimately enhancing public security.

Trends around the most threatening criminal networks were identified through the analysis of the full dataset of 821 networks.

<sup>3</sup> Any mention of criminal networks in this report, refers to the most threatening criminal networks as identified for the purpose of this report.

## The 'ABCD' of the most threatening criminal networks

This first-of-its-kind EU-wide assessment decodes the 'ABCD' of the most threatening criminal networks – they are Agile, Borderless, Controlling and Destructive. Recognising these common traits, and using them as a starting point for further analysis and action, will help policymakers make informed strategic decisions and help law enforcement target the most threatening criminal actors active in the EU.

### The most threatening criminal networks are...

#### Agile

*[adjective | able to adapt to new or changing situations or changes quickly and successfully]<sup>4</sup>*

The most threatening criminal networks exhibit remarkable agility. They are able to inventively make use of opportunities in the legal world, such as by using or setting up legal business structures to facilitate or conceal their criminal activity, and to launder their illicit proceeds. They are able to turn challenges to their benefit, as seen in recent geopolitical crises where criminal businesses continued as usual. They combine such flexibility in operations with a high degree of resilience against law enforcement disruption, using countermeasures or corruptive practices to obtain information on law enforcement investigations or to influence judicial proceedings. With such growth and survival strategies in place, many of the most threatening criminal networks are able to maintain their power and influence over very long periods of time, sometimes even longer than a decade. This concept of agility is applicable to criminal networks of any organisational structure, setup or size.

---

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, accessible at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/>

A key threat vector is criminal networks' strategy to infiltrate the legal business world – as a facilitator to commit their crimes, as a front to disguise their crimes, and as a vehicle for laundering criminal profits. **86 % of the most threatening criminal networks make use of legal business structures (LBSs).** The majority infiltrate LBSs at a high level or set up their own LBS. The sectors most vulnerable to infiltration by organised crime include construction, hospitality and logistics. Legal businesses are also key in laundering illicit proceeds, through money laundering methods that misuse real estate (investments), retail (investments in high value goods) and cash-intensive businesses (transactions). A few of the most threatening criminal networks engage in money laundering as their sole criminal business, also offering it as a service to other criminal actors. The greater the extent criminal networks can make use of legal companies, the stronger and more resilient these networks become.

The 821 identified networks are agile because of the flexibility they can apply to their operations, and their capacity to withstand disruptions. **34 % of the most threatening criminal networks have been active for more than 10 years.** During such extended periods of time, they have been able to maintain their influence and power even if leaders and members are detained. They are often aware of law enforcement initiatives and actively apply countermeasures – potentially also aided by corruptive practices to obtain information from or infiltrate law enforcement or the judiciary.

Such resilience and agility are underpinned by strong cohesion between network members. Cohesion is present in networks no matter how they are organised. **The most threatening criminal networks have an organisational setup that includes all possible variations on the spectrum of vertical and horizontal, and of small to large.** The majority of the most threatening criminal networks are vertical and hierarchical in nature, with a layered power structure, strong system of internal control and central leadership. Criminal networks organised more horizontally, around a core group of central figures or in a decentralised manner, are less common. The most threatening criminal networks can range from very few to many members. While an exact membership count is often not feasible, the membership of networks identified in this analysis typically ranges between 8 and 38.

Agility also refers to criminals' ability to adopt new technologies. The quality of the most threatening criminal networks' tools and expertise is often thought of as sophisticated and high-level, but case examples point to flexibility and ingenuity as more important means that help accomplish their criminal objectives.

## Borderless

*[adjective | used to describe a situation in which the border between countries is not important, usually in relation to the movement of goods, people, etc.]<sup>5</sup>*

The most threatening criminal networks run borderless criminal operations. Their activities touch many countries and their composition is very international, with network members from many countries of the EU and the world cooperating within networks. They have an international, and often global reach, yet they contain their criminal activity to a region or a limited number of countries.

The 821 most threatening criminal networks affect all 27 EU Member States. The majority have a reach that extends beyond the EU, particularly to countries in the EU neighbourhood, but also more distant locations.

This global reach is also reflected in criminal networks' composition, with **112 nationalities represented** among the members of the 821 most threatening criminal networks. **68 % of networks are composed of members from multiple nationalities, while 32 % have members from only one country.**

Multinational criminal networks are often composed of nationalities of neighbouring countries or of nationalities with large diaspora communities present in a specific country, while others have a very mixed, international membership. The networks with members from only one country are mostly EU-based. A strong cohesion based on nationality is observed for some of the most threatening criminal networks, but not all.

**76 % of the most threatening criminal networks are present or active in two to seven countries.**

This means that they maintain geographical focus and do not extend their activities too broadly. Less than a quarter operate in more than seven countries.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## Controlling

*[adjective | ordering, limiting, or ruling something, or someone's actions or behaviour]<sup>6</sup>*

The most threatening criminal networks exert strong control and focus over their criminal operations. They tend to specialise in one main criminal business – truly poly-criminal networks are exception rather than rule. They are characterised by a strong leadership that is often close to operations, but can also keep command and control remotely from global locations. Under a strong lead, networks often operate independently and tend to keep complete control over their activities, including essential support activities such as the laundering of their illicit proceeds. When they do cooperate, they do so in balanced, equal partnerships, often under the crime-as-a-service framework, in order to obtain specific technical or on-the-ground support.

Strong leadership is a key determinant for the most threatening criminal networks. It is not necessarily linked to a specific type of organisational structure or to a specific individual. Leaders of the most threatening criminal networks ensure close control over operations. **The leadership of 82 % of the most threatening criminal networks is settled either in the main country of activity or the country of origin of the key members.** Some distance themselves as a countermeasure or because they are detained, while still ensuring control and command remotely. **Around 6 % of the most threatening criminal networks have a leadership that coordinates operations from outside the EU** – a deliberate choice to move away from law enforcement reach as they feel the pressure.

The cooperation model of the most threatening criminal networks emphasises self-reliance or balanced partnerships. **They remain independent and keep close control over their main activities. When they do cooperate, they do so in balanced, equal partnerships.**

Such a cooperation model likely increases criminal efficiency and allows for a high degree of independence in controlling the full criminal business process, from start to end. **A majority of the most threatening criminal networks tend to have end-to-end control over the majority of their activities or over the main part of the criminal process.**

When in need of technical expertise or low-level executors, they delegate parts of the criminal process to external service providers. This crime-as-a-service business model further heightens the threat, as all the criminal network's needs can be catered for by other criminal actors through financial exchange. It allows networks to delegate and gain outside expertise for part of the criminal process or to

support criminal activities. Crime-as-a-service often revolves around a niche activity that requires a certain technical specialisation, or a low-level activity that is outsourced as a countermeasure. A few criminal networks offer crimes to other networks as their main activity – particularly money laundering or acts of violence, including threats to life as a service.

Also fitting with the characteristic of control is the finding that a large majority of the most threatening criminal networks keep a focus on one main criminal activity. Truly poly-criminal networks are the exception rather than the rule. **82 % of networks deal in one main criminal activity, making only 18 % poly-criminal.** This focus also means that they are often well-established in terms of their influence and dominance exerted over criminal markets.

The most threatening criminal networks remain involved in other types of crime that support, strengthen, or conceal their main crimes. Firearms trafficking, for example, is often committed together with drug trafficking or in support of violent activities such as extortion and racketeering. As profit is the main objective uniting criminal actors, money laundering is a key part of criminal enterprises, and **nearly all (96 %) networks launder their criminal proceeds themselves.**

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## Destructive

*[adjective | causing, or able to cause, damage]<sup>7</sup>*

The criminal activities and corruptive practices of the most threatening criminal networks inflict significant damage on the EU's internal security, rule of law, and economy. They do not operate in an isolated criminal underworld but directly impact EU citizens' lives. Examples include the increase of drug-related violence and turf wars on the streets of many EU cities, the abuse of vulnerable youngsters and other strata of vulnerable populations in organised crime, and the victimisation of many people in crimes like trafficking in human beings or fraud. Their power and influence have serious social ramifications, with citizens often fearing the consequences of reporting organised crime and feeling pressured to comply with it. Meanwhile, criminal networks continue to accumulate illicit proceeds and further invest them in both criminal activities and the legal world.

**Half of the most threatening criminal networks are involved in drug trafficking as (one of) their main criminal activity(-ies). Other relevant crime areas include fraud, property crime, migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings.** The impact of these crime areas is extensive and affects all layers of our society, directly harming the lives of millions of EU citizens.

Not all of the most threatening criminal networks use violence and/or corruption. When they do however, it further extends their threat level. Corruption and violence mutually reinforce each other. **71 % of networks engage in corruption to facilitate criminal activity or obstruct law enforcement or judicial proceedings.** Corruption facilitates all criminal activity and may be targeted towards both the private and public sectors. Corruption serves as a means to obtain information or to obstruct investigations and/or judicial proceedings. Corrupted individuals often become embedded in and part of criminal networks as they become intertwined in the network's activities. An exit from the network is difficult, also because corruptive practices are closely interlinked with violence and intimidation.

**68 % of networks use violence and intimidation as an inherent feature of their modus operandi. 32 % do not use violence, in order to avoid detection by law enforcement.** The use of violence is particularly applicable to drug trafficking, where it is also often more strategic and extreme. Some networks offer violent acts as a service to other criminal actors.

Some of the most threatening criminal networks **recruit from a young strata of the vulnerable population, even minors**, and abuse them to execute tasks in drug trafficking or to exploit them in criminal activities. They often do this as a countermeasure to avoid prosecution and/or identification of core network members or leadership.

The destructive nature of the most threatening criminal networks is already leaving its impact on EU citizen's lives and our society as a whole. The more visible presence of organised crime in cities (e.g a rise in violent attacks and territorial feuds) instils fear in some and tempts others to participate in criminal activities, lured by the promise of a rich lifestyle or pressured by (the threat of) violence.

These criminal networks are able to obtain large amounts of illicit profits and deploy these alongside other (human, material or technical) resources and expertise to further invest in their criminal capabilities.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## Turning findings into recommendations

A better understanding of the threat-generating aspects of the myriad of criminal networks active in the EU will assist law enforcement in better tailoring their operational approach and directing resources where they are needed most.

The ABCD of criminal networks highlights important elements to guide policy and operational action. A key recommendation is to further strengthen international cooperation to tackle the borderless nature of the most threatening criminal networks, both regionally within the EU as well as with non-EU partners. Investigations and operational activities can be more focused on the most threatening criminal networks, examining their ringleaders, and from there dismantling the complete network. Parallel investigations should also tackle the broader crime infrastructure<sup>8</sup> that supports and enables these networks' operations. As the most threatening criminal networks are agile and have integrated themselves into our society, we cannot fight them in an isolated way. Law enforcement must strengthen their partnerships with other actors to form comprehensive, all-encompassing approaches that tackle the roots of serious and organised crime, such as the administrative approach<sup>9</sup>.

While this analysis from the perspective of criminal actors is a first and already brings clear added value, the approach can be further refined by continuing the exchange of information, collecting more representative data, analysing the threat vectors for criminal networks and their implications on crime areas in-depth, and maximising operational action to dismantle these most threatening criminal networks in cross-border investigations.

---

8 Crime infrastructure refers to the enablers of crime, such as corruption, violence, money laundering, and misuse of legal business structures. These tools make it easier to commit crime or avoid apprehension.

9 The administrative approach entails equipping local administrations with necessary tools (such as revoking licenses) to prevent criminals' abuse of legal infrastructure. See also European Network on the Administrative Approach, accessible at <https://administrativeapproach.eu>



**DECODING THE EU'S MOST THREATENING CRIMINAL NETWORKS  
- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

PDF | ISBN 978-92-95236-41-7 | DOI 10.2813/0519228 | QL-01-24-001-EN-N

© European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, 2024

This executive summary has been translated for convenience purposes.  
Please note that the English version serves as the official reference.

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not under the  
copyright of the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation,  
permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.

**Cite this publication:** Europol (2024), Decoding the EU's most threatening criminal  
networks - Executive summary, Publications Office of the European Union,  
Luxembourg.

**The full report can be accessed on the Europol website:**

[www.europol.europa.eu](http://www.europol.europa.eu)

