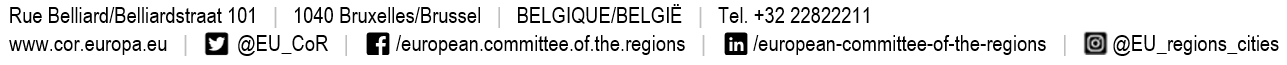
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| **CIVEX-VII/026** | |
| **161st plenary session, 19-20 June 2024** | |

**OPINION**

**EU roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime**



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| THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS   * shares the European Commission’s concern about the drugs trade orchestrated by organised crime: it is one of the main and serious health and security threats facing Europe today; * welcomes the efforts of the European Commission and all the bodies engaged in combating the drugs trade and organised crime; * stresses the importance of adopting permanent solutions and involving **local and regional authorities** in order to achieve the priority of increasing prevention, embracing harm reduction and public health principles; * welcomes the creation of an alliance [European Ports Alliance] based on public-private partnership involving all actors that play a crucial role in managing and safeguarding port security and are the first point of contact in the fight against drug smuggling and criminal infiltration. Notes that the partnership could also involve **local and regional authorities** in areas that border on the customs areas which accommodate logistic hubs; * considers it essential to **protect young people** from the activity of criminal organisations and to **disrupt criminal activity through** **essential investment in effective crime prevention policies** **and** **tools**, involving local communities**,** families, schools, the social welfare sector, civil society, law enforcement, the judiciary, prison authorities and the private sector; * stresses the need for **a substantial information campaign raising awareness among** **citizens and targeting especially adolescents** in order to provide proper information on the risks of taking illicit substances and the danger of falling into criminal networks; * stresses that, in order to prevent the use of illicit substances and problems related to drug addiction, it is necessary to ensure the presence of **a multi-level task force that operates in individual cities** with an integrated approach, promotes public-private projects for sharing expertise and information, enables good practices to be shared, **carries out** **two-tier prevention work** – targeting those who already use illicit substances and those who are potentially at risk – and provides psychological support also to families. |

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| Rapporteur  Rapporteur: Matteo Luigi Bianchi (IT/ECR), Member of the Local Assembly of Varese  Reference document  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 |

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – EU roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime**

1. **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

***Introduction***

# shares the European Commission’s concern about the drugs trade orchestrated by organised crime: it is one of the main and serious health and security threats facing Europe today. Data confirm that the situation in this regard is escalating in European cities and regions due to the increase of illicit drugs available and the production and proliferation of synthetic drugs[[1]](#footnote-1);

# welcomes the efforts of the European Commission and all the bodies engaged in combating the drugs trade and organised crime. In their efforts to make large profits, criminal networks use corruption, intimidation and violence in the streets, which has also led to numerous innocent casualties, in addition to the thousands of people across Europe who have died from a drug overdose[[2]](#footnote-2);

***EU strategy and response***

# welcomes the EU strategy to tackle organised crime for 2021-2025 and the EU drugs strategy and action plan for 2021-2025, which can contribute to intensifying the EU’s collective efforts in the fight against criminal networks and implement multidisciplinary prevention and care measures. Emphasises the role of AI and supercomputing in enhancing drug detection, predictive policing, and personalised rehabilitation programmes, thereby increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of these strategies;

# welcomes the initiatives put forward by the European Commission in the fight against criminal networks, which include the confiscation of their assets, facilitating financial investigations and improving cooperation between customs and law enforcement authorities;

# agrees that the cross-border nature of criminal networks requires ever-increasing cooperation with third countries (both those where drugs are produced and through which they transit before they reach Europe), and welcomes cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia;

# welcomes the financial support for the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) and the support for the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) which, by becoming the new European Union Drugs Agency, will be able to improve its threat assessment capabilities, monitor the spread of synthetic drugs in the EU to help develop countermeasures, and tackle drug precursors;

***Priority actions***

# agrees with the four priority areas identified by the Commission: substantially increasing the resilience of logistic hubs, dismantling criminal networks, increasing prevention and strengthening international cooperation;

# stresses the importance of adopting permanent solutions and involving local and regional authorities in order to achieve the priority of increasing prevention, embracing harm reduction and public health principles;

# agrees with strengthening EU cooperation with the Western Balkans through the existing forms of cooperation, their involvement in EMPACT and their exchange of data with the EMCDDA;

# notes that activities of criminal networks involved in drug trafficking also have a negative impact on the environment contributing to deforestation, habitat destruction, and pollution stemming from the production and disposal of chemicals used in synthetic drug manufacturing;

***The European Ports Alliance: substantially increasing the resilience of logistic hubs***

# welcomes the actions envisaged by the European Ports Alliance to substantially increase the resilience of logistic hubs in view of the huge volume of goods trade and passenger transit they receive annually[[3]](#footnote-3) and the infiltration of these centres by criminal networks[[4]](#footnote-4) using ports for illicit shipments;

# notes that, through the European Ports Alliance and the Customs programme, effective risk management and customs controls linked to illicit drugs and drug precursors smuggling[[5]](#footnote-5) should be facilitated in all ports (including smaller ports) and airports in the EU, thereby preventing smuggling moving to less monitored logistic hubs;

# points to the need for generalised use of digital and technological instruments that can identify the presence of substances that give a negative result in drug tests and container scans (already present in some ports), to carry out detailed checks that will not cause delays in the controls particularly for perishable goods. Notes that appropriate IT resources[[6]](#footnote-6) for data acquisition, analysis and selection are essential and that all customs posts should be systematically equipped with digital media without that being linked to the capacity or lack thereof of the post in question. In this context, the best practices already employed should be shared more between control and security forces;

# emphasises the need for investing in innovative tools and technology across all European ports and logistic hubs. This could include exploring solutions such as AI-driven surveillance, blockchain for supply chain transparency, and advanced data analytics for predictive policing. Highlights in this context the importance of monitoring and analysis of online platforms to trade and distribute drugs, while also ensuring that less developed regions receive adequate support to implement these advanced technologies to maintain a consistent level of security and efficiency across the EU;

# welcomes the creation of an alliance based on public-private partnership involving all actors that play a crucial role in managing and safeguarding port security and are the first point of contact in the fight against drug smuggling and criminal infiltration. Notes that the partnership could also involve local and regional authorities in areas that border on the customs areas which accommodate logistic hubs;

# notes that public-private partnerships can focus on the exchange of strategic and operational information, promote the exchange of good practice and identify anti-corruption measures, such as creating a confidential channel for staff to report potential pressure, promoting awareness‑raising activities on staff integrity and resilience;

# highlights the importance of asking individual ports and airports for feedback on their needs in terms of technical equipment and staff training, in order to ensure the optimal efficiency of their control activities;

***Dismantling high-risk criminal networks***

# fully agrees that criminal networks need to be dismantled to make a real difference in the fight against organised crime and that, to this end, cooperation between police forces in EU Member States should be promoted, with the aim of putting in place a better intelligence picture, with specialised services that are well trained and equipped with the right tools;

# recognises the importance of the Europol mapping exercise to identify criminal networks. The mapping should be regularly updated to provide Member States and local and regional authorities with valuable information on which international networks are active on their territory[[7]](#footnote-7);

# welcomes the support the Commission intends to give to the Customs Laboratories European Network and the European Network of Forensic Science Institutes; expresses great concern over drug precursors and highlights the need to detect illicit drugs early on and to quickly adapt legislation to deal with the entry on the market of new substances used to manufacture substances dangerous to health; acknowledges the different legislative arrangements in individual Member States, but stresses that combatting drug abuse should be a shared priority;

# recognises the need to remove all practical obstacles that may slow down investigative activity in order to ensure that investigative strategies are aligned and speed up the cross-border gathering of evidence;

# recognises the importance of the Schengen Information System (SIS) in hindering the movements of individuals involved in serious and organised crime, including drug trafficking, within the EU; calls on the Member States to make full use of the tools available under the SIS to target and dismantle the networks responsible for these criminal activities in European regions and cities;

***Prevention***

# agrees with the Commission that crime prevention is an integral part of a long-term response to combating organised crime. Stresses that – with cooperation between several entities and with proper communication – prevention can be a tangible means of reducing demand for illicit drugs and corruption and fighting organised crime;

# considers that local police officers’ work and capacity to act in the field of trafficking and consumption of narcotics, and the investigation of minor criminal offences resulting from the consumption of these substances, should be taken into consideration and recognised;

# agrees that suitable procedures need to be put in place at national and local levels on checks, tenders, subsidies and permits, to prevent criminal infiltration. Stresses that some Member States, such as Italy[[8]](#footnote-8), already have well-established frameworks in which local authorities are authorised to use administrative tools to prevent criminal infiltration into legal companies and administrative infrastructure. Warns that construction linked to urban development, as well as waste management, port management and public procurement, are the sectors most prone to corruption at the local level. Calls for targeted anti-corruption strategies in these areas, including the development of online portals to provide transparency and enable public scrutiny, and that the exchange of best practices and guidelines between all Member States should be stepped up to help them establish national frameworks for implementing this administrative approach;

# considers it necessary to coordinate and integrate the work of local police in large European cities in order to step up the fight against drugs and to form local police information networks for dealing with these types of crime;

# recognises that criminal networks, including drug traffickers, exploit vulnerable people and often use young people to carry out criminal activities, who then drop out of school or employment. Stresses the importance of targeted interventions for NEET, providing them with educational and employment opportunities;

# considers it essential to protect young people from the activity of criminal organisations and to disrupt criminal activity through essential investment in effective crime prevention policies and tools, involving local communities, families, schools, the social welfare sector, civil society, law enforcement, the judiciary, prison authorities and the private sector;

# recognises the importance of strengthening financial investigations through specific instruments and approaches and through public-private partnerships, in order to enable the exchange of information between financial authorities and institutions, and of strengthening anti-money laundering rules and confiscation and asset recovery efforts; highlights the importance of CEPOL training to help Member States boost the skills and competences of law enforcement authorities in financial investigations;

# notes that young people are approached by the world of illicit substances and criminal networks at an increasingly early age, and stresses the need for a substantial information campaign raising awareness among citizens and targeting especially adolescents in order to provide proper information on the risks of taking illicit substances and the danger of falling into criminal networks;

# welcomes the Commission’s efforts to increase the Member State authorities’ ability to carry out digital investigations by supporting the European Cybercrime Training and Education Group and the European Anti-Cybercrime Technology Development Association;

# calls on the Member States and the European Commission to support this information campaign, which must be conducted through all communication channels, especially the social media channels most used by young people, in cooperation with all local organisations such as schools, police forces, health authorities, local administrations, psychologists, specialised educators and technology experts. Stresses that the campaign should have a threefold objective: raising young people’s awareness around illicit substances and the risk of using them, making them aware that they are accountable for the crimes they might commit, and making them aware that in buying and/or selling illicit substances they could be supporting dangerous and violent criminal organisations;

# stresses that channels for assisting families and training teachers and local police officers also need to be enhanced; advocates for the inclusion of mental health training for teachers, local police officers, and other community figures, in order to help recognise signs of mental health issues, provide appropriate support, and destigmatise mental health problems;

# notes that there are places for social contact (sports associations, cultural spaces, youth centres, etc.) that are traditionally far removed from drug dealing and criminal infiltration, and should therefore be promoted as good examples. However, even in these environments it is important to follow guidelines setting out clear frameworks and requirements for reporting concerns to the relevant bodies;

# notes that projects have already been carried out to reduce criminal networks’ influence on children, for example in Ireland[[9]](#footnote-9) and Portugal[[10]](#footnote-10); that in recent years some Member States have put in place measures to fight the recruitment of young people by organised crime, for example in the Netherlands; and that in Sweden a new provision came into force in July 2023 making involving minors in criminal activities a criminal offence. Stresses that these good practices must be better known at European level;

# notes that more than 80% of criminal networks currently active in the EU use legal business structures for their criminal activities[[11]](#footnote-11) for example by setting up small businesses to launder illicit gains or to participate in public procurement, defrauding public institutions; therefore agrees with the Commission that it is essential that administrative authorities be aware of the important role they can play in the fight against organised crime;

# acknowledges the issues and obstacles in cross-border cooperation highlighted in a study published in February 2023 assessing the effectiveness of the 2008 Framework Decision on Organised Crime, pointing out the wide divergences among Member States in offences, penalties and investigative tools[[12]](#footnote-12); agrees on the importance of increasing cooperation between the Member States in order to strengthen their legal instruments to fight organised crime;

# calls for the development of a practical, evidence-based guide for assessing, guiding and supporting citizens with drug-related difficulties, and practical guidance for different contexts: families, school, work and community. Highlights the importance of providing comprehensive care, including physical and mental rehabilitation;

# welcomes the Commission’s intention to use the European Social Fund+ to support local initiatives to combat poverty, youth unemployment and to support social inclusion, in line with the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Stresses the need to identify quantitative and qualitative indicators on the use of the European Social Fund+, in particular for activities aimed at including vulnerable young people, in order to ensure positive and continuous results in all areas where there are risk situations in the European Union and, if necessary, to remedy them;

# notes that criminals use and alter the chemicals needed to make everyday products to manufacture illegal drugs, and that criminals can easily circumvent existing controls on these substances by constantly creating new designer precursors; welcomes the Commission’s willingness to move from the ‘substance-by-substance scheduling’ approach (which is time-consuming and makes it hard to keep up with the speed of innovation of organised crime) to innovative ways of speeding up and broadening the existing approach of scheduling drug precursors;

# stresses the importance of the CoR having been involved in the conference held by the Commission in 2024[[13]](#footnote-13) and calls for it to be fully involved in similar future conferences as well, – together with the Member States, the EU Crime Prevention Network, health practitioners and crime prevention practitioners – to present a collection of good practices on preventing recruitment in organised crime;

# agrees that 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. Notes that people who are willing or coerced to cooperate with organised crime are often part of the most vulnerable parts of the social fabric, such as individuals living in poverty and irregular migrants, who are disproportionately targeted by organised crime for exploitation due to their precarious circumstances. Individual motivations vary, but often they are fuelled by poverty, intimidation, desperation and social exclusion. Notes that this leads to extreme insecurity and dramatic deterioration of the overall quality of life for local communities in these areas; stresses the importance of community-based initiatives that build resilience against criminal exploitation by fostering a sense of belonging and providing alternatives to involvement in illicit activities;

# stresses that local authorities are the bodies most directly concerned with security and people’s health in their areas. Stresses the need for all cities to be given the necessary resources to provide suitable presence of properly trained local police. Suitable urban infrastructure improvements, such as, appropriate lighting and surveillance systems, alongside awareness raising efforts about the risks and support available, are essential;

# notes that it is in the weaker parts of the social fabric that people who are willing to cooperate with organised crime can be found, such as unemployed people or foreign nationals who are irregular and unintegrated or without work who are being asked to transport illegal drugs, people who have nothing to lose and who do not even fear the judicial consequences;

# notes the close links between substance abuse and human trafficking and the weaponisation of drugs by traffickers in order to entrap and control their victims. Calls to this effect for a coordinated action to combat both forms of trafficking, often executed simultaneously or by the same criminal networks;

# underlines the shortage of police officers, who could not only strengthen activities to investigate and fight drug dealing and organised crime, thus ensuring greater security for local communities, but also carry out preventive activities to help young people by removing the opportunity for them to come into contact with criminals and dealers at an early age. Insists in this regard on the need for fair remuneration and due recognition of the work of municipal law enforcement and police officers in order to improve the attractiveness of their profession;

# notes with concern the proliferation of zones of lawlessness linked to the retail drug trade across European cities and often located around large social housing infrastructures. Beyond the much-needed police interventions, in order to build and restore the culture of legality in these areas and not just temporarily displace gang activities, both central and local governments should develop alternatives for the weakest links in the chain and replace the illegal order with inclusive urban development.

# stresses that, in order to prevent the use of illicit substances and problems related to drug addiction, it is necessary to ensure the presence of a multi-level task force that operates in individual cities with an integrated approach, promotes public-private projects for sharing expertise and information, enables good practices to be shared, carries out two-tier prevention work – targeting those who already use illicit substances and those who are potentially at risk – and provides psychological support also to families;

# calls on the Commission to raise awareness among all Member States of the need to set up such a task force, together with local and regional authorities, in all cities where one is not already present. This should, within a few years, result in a network of reference centres for people at risk and their families, treating the physical and mental health of victims of illicit substance addiction and criminal networks, raising potential victims’ awareness and supporting vulnerable individuals and communities. Stresses that the aim of the initiative we are proposing here would be both to protect health and to prevent drug-related offences and help weaken criminal networks;

# commits to promoting the rationale behind the United Nations' International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking (26 June);

***International cooperation***

# agrees with the Commission that fighting drug trafficking requires cooperation with the countries and regions through which the main drug supply routes run, and that 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 or their assets; emphasises the importance of also fostering environmental cooperation to address and mitigate the ecological impacts of drug production and trafficking, including deforestation and pollution;

# agrees with the Commission regarding the importance of the various activities linked to Africa when it comes to intercepting and fighting trafficking along major drug trafficking routes from South America;

# agrees with the concern about the spread of synthetic drugs, which have proliferated internationally and are also produced in Europe, posing a serious threat to health and security;

# agrees that, as modern criminal networks are cross-border in nature and exploit the gaps between jurisdictions to manage drug trafficking and conceal and launder their revenues, effective cooperation with non-EU countries is needed and therefore existing police and judicial cooperation with third countries needs to be strengthened;

# stresses that even where cooperation is successful, it is still necessary to modernise the legislative and judicial framework, and to provide for the implementation of technological tools and new forms of communication on the ground in order to increase the cooperation of local communities;

# welcomes all the cooperation initiatives with the various Latin American countries, and the international judicial cooperation agreements with Eurojust;

# welcomes the EU’s accession to the US-led Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats, which can improve surveillance capabilities worldwide.

Brussels, 20 June 2024

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| The President of the European Committee of the Regions     Vasco Alves Cordeiro |  |
|  | The Secretary-General of the European Committee of the Regions     Petr Blížkovský |

1. **PROCEDURE**

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| **Title** | **EU roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime** |
| **Reference** | COM(2023) 641 |
| **Legal basis** | Own-initiative opinion (Article 307(4)) TFEU |
| **Procedural basis** | Rule 41(b) (i) of the RP |
| **Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter** | COM(2023) 641: Commission (24/10/23) |
| **Date of Bureau/President’s decision** | 6/11/2023 |
| **Commission responsible** | CIVEX-VII - 7th Term of office - Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs |
| **Rapporteur** | Matteo Luigi Bianchi (IT/ECR), Member of the Local Assembly of Varese |
| **Discussed in commission** | 6/2/2024 |
| **Date adopted by commission** | 10/4/2024 |
| **Result of the vote in commission**  **(majority/unanimity)** | Majority |
| **Adopted at plenary** | 19/6/2024 |
| **Previous Committee opinions** | * [A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: anticipate, prevent, protect, respond](https://cor.europa.eu/EN/our-work/Pages/OpinionTimeline.aspx?opid=CDR-1900-2021) |
| **Subsidiarity reference** | N/A |

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1. <https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/eu-drug-markets_en>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/european-drugreport/2023/drug-induced-deaths_en>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 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>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Europol\_Joint-report\_Criminal networks in EU ports\_Public\_version.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Europol_Joint-report_Criminal%20networks%20in%20EU%20ports_Public_version.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The *Guardia di finanza* of Malpensa airport (through which 70% of goods transiting through Italian airports transit each year, and over 75% of seizures of drugs transiting through Italian airports occur precisely in Malpensa airport – see the Italian Parliament’s annual report on drug addiction in Italy for 2023) has developed *S3 - Sistema Selezione Spedizioni* [shipment selection system], which identifies shipments that need to be physically checked, along with *Geo S.A.T.* *Sistemi Analisi Tabulati GEOlocalizzati* [GEOlocated List Analysis Systems] software and the *A.CR.A.PAX* (airport criminal analysis of passengers) database. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publication-events/main-reports/decoding-eus-most-threatening-criminal-networks>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Italian approach involves prior checking of companies wishing to participate in public contracts. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://eucpn.org/document/ireland-the-greentown-project>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://efus.eu/activities/european-cooperation/the-city-of-lisbon-rewarded-for-its-work-on-community-policing/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/socta-report>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Council Framework Decision 2008/841/JHA of 24 October 2008 on the fight against organised crime (OJ L 300, 11.11.2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.eucpn.org/events/ecpc2024>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)