

BACKGROUND NOTE

Scrutiny session I – Combating drug trafficking in Europe – challenges for the Europol and member states

The gravity of the problem of drug trafficking but also consumption in European Union is growing rapidly. The most commonly used illicit drug is still Cannabis, with approximately 22.6 million adults (8% of the EU population aged 15-64) reporting use in 2024, while cocaine is the second most prevalent, with around 4 million adults (1.4% of the EU population aged 15-64). Regarding synthetic drugs, amphetamine and methamphetamine are among the most prevalent synthetic stimulants, with a growing problem of the emergence of new psychoactive substances (NPS), synthetic cathinones and synthetic opioids. In 2023, seven new synthetic opioids were formally notified within the EU, with six belonging to the potent nitazene group. Moreover, according to the European Drug Report 2024 the complexity of the drug market increases with an adulteration of traditional drugs with synthetic substances. For instance, cannabis products have been found laced with synthetic cannabinoids, and MDMA tablets sometimes contain synthetic cathinones or opioids, elevating health risks for users.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has further exacerbated the threat posed by organized crime, particularly in the production and trafficking of synthetic drugs. The conflict has created conditions that allow criminal groups to exploit weakened border controls, disrupted law enforcement structures, and economic instability in the region. These groups are increasingly involved in the production of synthetic drugs like Alpha-PVP, which are then trafficked across Europe. The proliferation of these substances, including highly potent synthetic opioids like methadone, poses a growing challenge for the EU, both in terms of public health risks and the ability to effectively counter these evolving criminal networks. Enhanced cooperation under EMPACT (European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats), alongside targeted operational efforts, is essential to address the cross-border nature of these threats.

At the same time there is growing problem with organized crime related to drug trafficking, which accounts for around 20% of all profits from organized crime in Europe. With a substantial demand for drugs in Europe new trafficking routes develop. Traditionally cocaine is trafficked to Europe by both sea and air, primarily via Colombia, Brazil and Venezuela. The Caribbean and West Africa are important transit

areas, while Central America appears to be becoming more important. Cocaine is smuggled into Europe in many ways, from air couriers and express packages to private yachts and jets. The use of maritime containers is of increasing concern. A huge array of concealment methods is used, including those that require chemical extraction. At the same time drug trafficking further destabilizes countries already grappling with serious political, social, health, and economic challenges. The evolution of the Southern route—from Afghanistan through Pakistan or Iran, via the Persian Gulf and East Africa—is particularly concerning due to its potential to play a greater role in supplying heroin and other drugs to Europe while also exacerbating instability in African countries.

Such a challenge requires various methods of combating drug trafficking, sale and consumption, with many various actors cooperating to achieve this goal. As drug trafficking is one the crimes expressly mentioned in the article 83 of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union it is clear that it is a subject of common interest, although particular competence are scattered among Europol, European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) established in 2024 and Member States, which play a leading role here. Europol is empowered to act as a central hub for criminal intelligence, facilitating the exchange of information and coordination of operations among Member States to combat drug trafficking and other forms of serious organized crime. It therefore mainly collects, process, analyze and exchange information as well as coordinates and organizes operational actions to support and strengthen actions by Member States' competent authorities, including joint investigations and specialized operations.

EMPACT is a key instrument of the European Union to combat organized crime, including drug-related threats. Its primary goal is to identify the most serious criminal threats and coordinate joint actions to tackle them. EMPACT operates on four-year cycles, with the current cycle spanning from 2022 to 2025. Among its ten priority areas, drug trafficking remains one of the most critical.

Within EMPACT, two platforms are dedicated to addressing drug-related challenges. The first, focused on synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances (NPS), is led by Poland. Poland plays a pivotal role in coordinating international efforts to combat the production, trafficking, and distribution of synthetic drugs, with a particular focus on synthetic cathinones and synthetic opioids, including the emerging threat of nitazene compounds. The second platform addresses the trafficking of traditional drugs such as cannabis, cocaine, and heroin. Spain leads this effort, targeting criminal networks involved in the cultivation, production, and distribution of these substances within the EU. Through EMPACT, both platforms work in close collaboration with Europol, EUDA, CEPOL, FRONTEX and Member States to enhance information sharing, operational coordination, and the implementation of effective measures against drug-related crime.

Europol is also required to cooperate closely with EUDA, which was established under the Regulation (EU) 2023/1322 on the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1920/2006 and started to operate since June 2024. The EUDA mission concentrates on assist the EU institutions and Member States in anticipating and responding effectively to drug-related threats. The EUDA is obliged to cooperate with Europol in order to ensure the collection of data, and the monitoring of trends, on drug supply, including illicit production and trafficking and other related crimes, on the use of new technologies and on new psychoactive substances.