

Serious and Organised Crime in the EU: A corrupting influence



Today, Europol publishes the European Union (EU) Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment, the [EU SOCTA 2021](#). The SOCTA, published by Europol every four years, presents a detailed analysis of the threat of serious and organised crime facing the EU. The SOCTA is a forward-looking assessment that identifies shifts in the serious and organised crime landscape.

The SOCTA 2021 details the operations of criminal networks in the EU and how their criminal activities and business practices threaten to undermine our societies, economy and institutions, and slowly erode the rule of law. The report provides unprecedented insights into Europe's criminal underworld based on the analysis of thousands of cases and pieces of intelligence provided to Europol.

The SOCTA reveals a concerning expansion and evolution of serious and organised crime in the EU. The document warns of the potential long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and how these may create ideal conditions for crime to thrive in the future. The report clearly highlights serious and organised crime as the key internal security challenge currently facing the EU and its Member States.

Launched at the Portuguese Police's headquarters (Policia Judiciária) in Lisbon during the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the SOCTA 2021 is the most comprehensive and in-depth study of serious and organised crime in the EU ever undertaken.

THE MOST PRESSING INTERNAL SECURITY THREAT TO THE EU

EU citizens enjoy some of the highest levels of prosperity and security in the world. However, the EU still faces serious challenges to its internal

security, threatening to undo some of our common achievements and undermine shared European values and ambitions. As the EU is facing the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most significant crises since the end of World War II, criminals seek to exploit this extraordinary situation targeting citizens, businesses, and public institutions alike.

The analysis presented in the SOCTA 2021 highlights key characteristics of serious and organised crime such as the widespread use of corruption, the infiltration and exploitation of legal business structures for all types of criminal activity, and the existence of a parallel underground financial system that allows criminals to move and invest their multi-billion euro profits.

Serious and organised crime encompasses a diverse range of criminal phenomena ranging from the trade in illegal drugs to crimes such as migrant smuggling and the trafficking in human beings, economic and financial crime and many more.

Key findings of the SOCTA 2021:

- Serious and organised crime has never posed as high a threat to the EU and its citizens as it does today.
- The COVID-19 pandemic and the potential economic and social fallout expected to follow threaten to create ideal conditions for organised crime to spread and take hold in the EU and beyond. Once more confirmed by the pandemic, a key characteristic of criminal networks is their agility in adapting to and capitalising on changes in the environment in which they operate. Obstacles become criminal opportunities.
- Like a business environment, the core of a criminal network is composed of managerial layers and field operators. This core is surrounded by a range of actors linked to the crime infrastructure providing support services.
- With nearly 40 percent of the criminal networks active in drugs trafficking, the production and trafficking of drugs remains the largest criminal business in the EU.
- The trafficking and exploitation of human beings, migrant smuggling, online and offline frauds and property crime pose significant threats to EU citizens.
- Criminals employ corruption. Almost 60% of the criminal networks reported engage in corruption.
- Criminals make and launder billions of euros annually. The scale and complexity of money laundering activities in the EU have previously been underestimated. Professional money launderers have established a parallel underground financial system and use any means to infiltrate and undermine Europe's economies and societies.
- Legal business structures are used to facilitate virtually all types of criminal activity with an impact on the EU. More than 80% of the criminal networks active in the EU use legal business structures for their criminal activities.
- The use of violence by criminals involved in serious and organised crime in the EU appears to have increased in terms of the frequency of use and its severity. The threat from violent incidents has been augmented by

the frequent use of firearms or explosives in public spaces.

- Criminals are digital natives. Virtually all criminal activities now feature some online component and many crimes have fully migrated online. Criminals exploit encrypted communications to network among each other, use social media and instant messaging services to reach a larger audience to advertise illegal goods, or spread disinformation.

Portugal's Minister for Justice, Francisca Van Dunem: "The strengthening of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice requires us all to build a Europe where citizens feel safe, free and protected, a Europe that promotes justice for all, ensuring respect for human rights and protecting victims of crime. Cooperation and information sharing are essential to combat serious and organised crime and terrorism and to tackle the threat the EU is confronted with. Therefore, at a time of transition to the new EMPACT cycle 2022-2025, SOCTA 2021 is of particular relevance in identifying priorities for the operational response to these phenomena".

Europol's Executive Director Catherine De Bolle: "With the launch of the SOCTA 2021, Europol has harnessed its position as the nerve centre of the EU's internal security architecture with its platforms, databases, and services connecting law enforcement authorities across the EU and beyond. The intelligence picture and assessment presented in the SOCTA 2021 is a stark reminder of the dynamic and adaptable adversary we face in serious and organised crime in the EU."

Ylva Johansson, European Commissioner for Home Affairs: "The 2021 SOCTA report clearly shows that organised crime is a truly transnational threat to our societies. 70% of criminal groups are active in more than three Member States. The complexity of the modern criminal business models was exposed in 2020 when French and Dutch authorities supported by Europol and Eurojust dismantled EncroChat; an encrypted phone network used by criminal networks. Organised crime groups are professional and highly adaptable as shown during the COVID-19 pandemic. We must support law enforcement to keep up, offline and online, to follow the digital trail of criminals."

Minister of Internal Affairs, Eduardo Cabrita: "The EU's Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA 2021), produced by Europol, constitutes an important instrument for affirming the European police partnership. It allows police action to go from pursuing criminal facts and minimising their impact, to anticipating trends in the criminal landscape. By placing intelligence at the service of security, we enable police to be more pro-active and efficient in tackling crime."

The SOCTA 2021 assists decision-makers in the prioritisation of serious and organised crime threats. It is a product of close cooperation between Europol, EU Member States law enforcement authorities, third parties such as EU agencies, international organisations, and countries outside the EU with working arrangements with Europol. These crucial stakeholders' involvement is also reflected in the SOCTA's role as the cornerstone of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) in the EU.

Headquartered in The Hague, the Netherlands, Europol supports the 27 EU Member States in their fight against terrorism, cybercrime, and other serious and organized crime forms. Europol also works with many non-EU partner states and international organisations. From its various threat assessments to its intelligence-gathering and operational activities, Europol has the tools and resources it needs to do its part in making Europe safer.