Council of Europe International Cooperation Group on Drugs and Addictions

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2nd Annual Law Enforcement Conference: Drug Control Networks

Preliminary Conference Report

1. Introduction

The 2nd Annual Law Enforcement Conference: Drug Control Networks took place in Strasbourg from 19-21 November 2024. The event brought together approximately 150 professionals from diverse sectors of law enforcement, such as customs, justice, academia and the private sector, representing 26 Pompidou Group member states in addition to three Council of Europe member states, three observer states, one MedNET state, and one third country. Key international organisations, such as Interpol, Europol, Eurojust, UNODC, EUDA, OSCE, SELEC and WCO, also participated.

The event covered a broad range of topics, including drug manufacturing, trafficking through general aviation, the digital drug trade, precursor chemicals, synthetic drugs, AI in drug control, and the environmental impact of drug production waste. Group sessions focused on operational strategies, global drug supply challenges, crime trends in Europe, legislative developments, counterfeit product proliferation, cryptocurrency and money laundering in drug trafficking, and last but not least the role of open-source intelligence.

2. Conference Sectoral Summary

2.1 Drug Supply, Production and Trafficking

The global drug landscape was reported to still be facing significant shifts in trafficking and production. Cocaine, cannabis, methamphetamines, and New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) such as nitazenes are on the rise, presenting new public health risks. While opium production in Afghanistan has declined due to the Taliban's ban, methamphetamine and synthetic drug production are increasing in other regions. The Middle East, Golden Triangle, and South America remain key hubs for illicit drug production, with Colombia seeing record coca cultivation. Despite law enforcement advances, global drug availability persists, fuelled by conflict zones, weak governance, and the fragmentation of criminal networks.

Organised crime groups (OCGs) continue to evolve, with less sophisticated groups using more violence, especially in open drug markets. Firearms and drugs often travel on the same routes, exacerbating violence in socially disadvantaged areas. Traditional organised groups, like the Cosa Nostra, are in decline due to law enforcement actions, but the complexity and competition among drug trafficking organisations remain high. The ongoing instability in regions like the Sahel and Ukraine has further disrupted drug trafficking networks, yet at the same time facilitated the growth of synthetic drug markets.

To address the worldwide drug issue, a comprehensive strategy is essential. Enhancing global collaboration, employing cutting-edge technologies (like AI, drones, and Raman technology), and encouraging public-private partnerships are essential measures. Law enforcement agencies were urged to keep implementing proactive strategies such as deflection, which links users to treatment and recovery, and using regulatory methods like civil forfeiture to disrupt the financial systems of organised crime groups. Furthermore, prevention, education, and capacity development were highlighted as vital instruments for a comprehensive solution, guaranteeing the sustained breakdown of trafficking activities and lowering the need for illicit activities and drugs.

2.2 Precursors

The global trade in narcotics and psychotropic substances remains a major challenge, driven largely by the illicit trafficking of precursors and pre-precursors—chemicals essential for synthetic drug production. While some substances, like cannabis and khat, are natural; synthetic drugs rely heavily on these chemicals. Precursors are integral to the drug manufacturing process, making them a key focus of international control efforts. However, the widespread legitimate use of these chemicals in industries such as pharmaceuticals and agriculture make it difficult to regulate and prevent their diversion into the illicit market.

In recent years, the trafficking of pre-precursors—chemicals used to produce precursors—has emerged as a growing concern, further complicating enforcement efforts. While precursor chemicals are regulated under international frameworks like the 1988 United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs, the ease with which pre-precursors are accessed and their limited regulation make them an attractive option for traffickers. The Netherlands, Luxembourg, and other European countries have reported significant seizures of precursors, indicating the scale of this issue. Moreover, organised crime groups increasingly use innovative smuggling methods, such as remailing, to evade detection.

Tackling the changing challenges of precursor and synthetic drug trafficking necessitates a thorough strategy that involves enhanced international collaboration, adaptable regulatory systems, and more robust public-private partnerships. Law enforcement agencies are urged to adjust to the increasing variety of chemicals used in drug production/manufacturing and adopt more proactive measures, such as monitoring new chemicals. Improved intelligence exchange, better international collaboration, and the creation of monitoring lists for unregulated materials are essential in addressing this intricate and growing global issue.

2.3 Synthetic Drugs

The synthetic drugs' landscape has evolved significantly, as being driven by geographic shifts and advancements in technology. Following Afghanistan's reduction in opium production, synthetic drugs, including fentanyl and Captagon, have emerged as major substitutes, with precursors often trafficked through Central Asia. Law enforcement efforts targeting large Darknet platforms/markets, like Hydra, have led to a shift towards smaller, decentralised online drug markets where cryptocurrencies facilitate transactions and laundering. This new landscape presents challenges in both tracking supply chains and managing law enforcement responses.

Fentanyl's rise in North America has sparked a deadly public health crisis, with overdose deaths surging due to its potency, availability, and low cost compared to heroin. As fentanyl spreads, its analogues are being distributed by transnational organised crime groups across Europe and Oceania, raising concerns about a global escalation. In response, initiatives such as Italy's National Prevention Plan aim to intercept fentanyl at the source, while the UK faces a similar challenge with nitazenes, another potent synthetic opioid, driving a need for expanded harm reduction measures and more accessible treatment for users.

Captagon has emerged as a significant problem in the Middle East, especially in Gulf countries, where it is associated with organised crime syndicates and political groups. Attempts to decrease supply via law enforcement actions have faced rising violence and innovative smuggling methods. Tackling the need for Captagon necessitates global co-operation, awareness, and assistance for addiction rehabilitation. The increasing prevalence of synthetic drugs highlights the necessity for a comprehensive approach, involving regulatory advancements, public awareness initiatives, and global collaboration to effectively address both supply and demand.

2.4 Drugs Online

The online drug market has evolved rapidly, with platforms like the Darknet providing criminals with new avenues for trafficking illicit substances. The anonymity of the internet, especially via cryptocurrencies and social media, has allowed traffickers to exploit loopholes in global drug control efforts, facilitating the distribution of dangerous synthetic opioids and novel psychoactive substances. Darknet marketplaces continue to thrive despite law enforcement crackdowns, with platforms like Abacus Market enabling the sale of drugs, including fentanyl analogues and nitazenes, which contribute to the ongoing global overdose crisis.

The rise of online gaming platforms and social media has created new spaces for drug cartels and organised crime groups to operate. These platforms allow for anonymous communication and transactions, often targeting vulnerable users, including minors, through unregulated chat rooms and gaming features. Games like “Grand Theft Auto” and “Fortnite” have been used by criminals for recruitment and drug sales, while the increased use of AI and blockchain technologies by both law enforcement and criminals adds complexity to efforts to combat digital crime. Tools like SNOOP and blockchain intelligence are being leveraged to track and disrupt drug trade activities, but the adaptability of traffickers and the lack of consistent online regulations remain significant hurdles.

These persistent and escalating challenges indicate that global collaboration and a unified strategy are essential. Government agencies, law enforcement bodies, and the private sector must collaborate to strengthen digital monitoring, enhance content management on online platforms, and create more robust regulatory systems. Strengthening law enforcement capabilities is essential, just as enhancing public awareness about the dangers of online drug trafficking is important. As criminals increasingly adopt advanced technology, ongoing innovation and international co-operation are crucial to dismantle illegal networks and guarantee the safety and security of digital environments.

2.5 Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming law enforcement practices, particularly in drug enforcement and security screening. Experts highlighted how AI tools are being used to improve predictive capabilities in drug law enforcement. AI can monitor and predict the emergence of designer drugs by analysing trends in drug formulations and distribution networks. AI's ability to analyse vast datasets and recognise patterns provides agencies with valuable intelligence, allowing them to stay ahead of evolving drug trends and enhancing proactive enforcement strategies.

AI has the potential to revolutionise security screening processes, particularly in high-risk environments such as airports and border checkpoints. AI-driven solutions can automate the detection of prohibited items like weapons, explosives, and drugs, improving accuracy and reducing human error. These technologies not only enhance efficiency but also allow agencies to manage large volumes of data, making it possible to detect threats more quickly and accurately. As security threats become increasingly complex, AI is poised to become an essential tool in safeguarding public safety and national security.

To fully leverage AI advantages in law enforcement, agencies need to emphasise training, collaboration between agencies, and the creation of flexible regulatory frameworks grounded in shared, accepted standards. Specialists emphasised the importance for law enforcement to remain adaptable amid swiftly changing technologies and drug markets. Through encouraging collaboration between the public and private sectors, allocating resources to AI research and knowledge sharing, and enhancing AI models for drug identification, organisations can more effectively tackle the drug crisis and strengthen security protocols. Ongoing assessment and feedback mechanisms will be vital to guarantee that AI tools stay efficient and flexible in this changing environment.

2.6 International Co-operation Against Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking remains a major global issue that affects public health, security, and economic stability, requiring robust international co-operation. The scale of the problem demands cross-border collaboration to share intelligence, co-ordinate law enforcement, and disrupt trafficking networks. Law enforcement operational challenges include resource limitations, fragmented systems, and privacy concerns. These make it difficult to effectively combat the fast-moving and constantly evolving drug trade, with traffickers using advanced technologies to evade detection.

International co-operation is key to addressing these challenges, with models like Italy's multi-agency approach and collaborative frameworks such as INTERPOL facilitating joint operations and information exchange. Agreements like the United Nations Conventions and regional treaties, including the EU's frameworks, provide essential legal structures for cross-border co-operation. Tools like Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) enable law enforcement agencies from different countries to work together on specific cases, while innovations in cybercrime protocols and digital borders improve the ability to tackle drug-related cybercrime and smuggling methods.

To enhance the fight against drug trafficking, it is essential to revise and align legal frameworks that would tackle emerging trafficking techniques and technologies. Funding in cutting-edge technologies like AI-based solutions and improved screening techniques, combined with secure data-sharing systems, is essential to outpace traffickers and organised crime strategies. Capacity-building efforts, including educating law enforcement officials and fostering public awareness initiatives focused on prevention from the outset, will enhance operational efficiency. A more co-ordinated and effective response to drug trafficking is ensured by balancing law enforcement requirements with privacy safeguards and promoting international co-operation.

2.7 Airports, General Aviation and Maritime

The patterns of drug trafficking into and through Europe have evolved significantly, presenting increasingly complex challenges for law enforcement and border control agencies. As highlighted by the World Customs Organisation (WCO), the COVID-19 pandemic induced a notable shift in trafficking dynamics, marked by a decrease in courier arrests, coupled with a significant rise in drug seizures, particularly through mail services. While arrests experienced some recovery in 2022, they did not return to pre-pandemic levels. Moreover, data from 2022 to 2023 revealed a concerning twofold increase in drug transport via couriers. These developments emphasise the critical need for more adaptive and responsive enforcement strategies to address the evolving nature of the threat.

In light of the growing threat, a co-ordinated, multi-agency approach is imperative. Strengthened collaboration between law enforcement, customs, and coast guard services is essential to addressing the complex nature of drug trafficking, especially across maritime and air routes. Such co-operation facilitates a unified operational framework, enhancing intelligence sharing and response efficiency. Additionally, significant investment in advanced detection technologies, particularly for monitoring fast-moving vessels and aircraft, is critical to bolstering border security. The development of a centralised system for real-time alerts and risk-based targeting (RBT) will further optimise resource allocation and improve operational effectiveness.

To address ongoing challenges, particularly regarding information exchange under the Schengen Border Code, legislative updates are essential. The European Commission's proposed changes to improve data collection from private jets and yachts are a positive step, though implementation may face challenges. Strengthening international co-operation, as seen in operations like Op Baitun, is crucial in tackling transnational drug trafficking. Enhancing cross-border partnerships, securing communication channels, and promoting community engagement are key to a more co-ordinated and resilient response to drug trafficking across Europe.

2.8 Conclusions

These issues will be further elaborated upon using the presentations delivered during the conference sessions, as well as the recommendations generated from the event evaluation. These insights and guidelines will serve as a roadmap for the Pompidou Group to advance its agenda, particularly focusing on the Law Enforcement component and its related areas.

- The **global drug challenge** poses severe risks to public health, security, and economic stability, necessitating a comprehensive response.

- **Addressing the illicit drug trade** requires international co-operation, as transnational criminal organisations exploit global logistics and alliances. The illicit drug trafficking and their precursors continues to exacerbate the crisis.

- Law enforcement is urgently facing **the need to adapt to the evolving landscape of drug production** and trading particularly with the rise of synthetic substances like fentanyl and Captagon, which are the major issues in North America and the Middle East.

- The **digital drug market** has surged, with the Darknet providing new trading platforms for illicit substances, underscoring the need for enhanced regulatory oversight of online content.

- **AI is revolutionising law enforcement** and its impact, improving predictive abilities and automating detection processes, while also posing challenges for law enforcement to address it from the other side.

- Specialised and comprehensive training, collaboration, and updated regulatory frameworks would and could allow for **ultimate transnational partnerships and strategies**.

Summary of Tour de Table / Questionnaire Results

Annex: I. Combatting Drug Production and Trafficking: Trends and Modus Operandi

The **Tour de Table results** present findings from a questionnaire submitted by countries and organisations ahead of the 2nd Annual Conference's "Tour de Table" on drug issues. Responses reveal **trends in drug production, trafficking, and organised crime** evolving with digitalisation and encrypted communications. Drugs are increasingly mailed or hidden in public, with violence, corruption, and money laundering supporting these activities. Chinese, Mexican, and Colombian cartels collaborate with North American gangs, worsening public health crises. In the U.S., social media aids illegal drug sales and gang recruitment. Canadian groups traffic cocaine and fentanyl, while Denmark sees rising gang violence. The EU faces organised crime characterised by corruption and violence, with drug smuggling, especially cocaine, thriving due to high demand and profitability, as well as synthetic production increasing significantly.

Synthetic drug labs are emerging in Switzerland, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia, with a notable rise in New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) due to regulatory gaps and cryptocurrency use. Europol reports a shift in drug trafficking towards large-scale container and postal shipments, using advanced concealment methods that complicate detection, particularly in air transport. High-value traffickers employ cryptography and AI to avoid law enforcement. While cocaine and cannabis trafficking persist, heroin seizures have dropped, possibly linked to reduced Afghan poppy cultivation. New routes for methamphetamines and synthetic opioids are developing, and West Africa is becoming a key cocaine transit hub. Airports represent critical vulnerabilities, where corrupt personnel and recruitment of marginalised individuals worsen risks, impacting security efforts across Europe.

Over the past year, numerous countries have enacted **laws and policies to combat drug production and trafficking**. Austria amended its NPS Ordinance to regulate LSD, while Belgium combines international regulations with national laws to address drug issues, despite challenges in enforcement. Bulgaria aligns with EU standards, and Canada employs Civil Forfeiture laws against drug-related crimes. Cyprus's National Strategy (2021-2028) focuses on prevention and harm reduction. Czechia and Denmark introduce reforms targeting synthetic drugs and gang crime, respectively. Estonia's strategy emphasises youth drug availability reduction and international collaboration, while Finland and Greece align policies with EU standards and health-focused strategies.

Israel bans dangerous drug imports, while Italy uses technology for drug detection. Jordan focuses on prevention and international co-operation in its anti-drug strategy. Lithuania has banned smart shops through strict regulations; Luxembourg collaborates with Europol for intelligence sharing. Malta employs various legal frameworks to combat drug trafficking. Mexico regulates chemical precursors, and New Zealand addresses trafficking via the Drugs Act of 1975. The OSCE enhances investigation through international conventions. Türkiye has an action plan against methamphetamine, amending the Penal Code for stricter drug penalties. The UK uses customs co-operation and international treaties, while the US DEA targets cartel networks in a unified effort.

In 2023, innovative **tools and technologies emerged** in drug detection. INTERPOL manages a global Drugs Analysis File and Relief database to monitor criminal activities. EUROPOL enhanced communication with secure tools like SIENA and VCP CONNECT and focused on serious organised crime through operational task forces and Innovation Laboratory for R&D in AI and forensics. SELEC implemented advanced x-ray scanning and data-sharing platforms to track Balkan drug trafficking. Countries like the Netherlands and Austria deployed advanced analysers for substance identification, while Denmark and Estonia leveraged AI for network analysis and drug trafficking patterns. Czechia used AI for risk analysis, and the UK's Border 5 initiative integrated customs data for risk assessment and drug shipment detection.

Lithuania and Luxembourg bolstered drug precursor monitoring with advanced IT systems; Lithuania introduced PTAKIS for tracking legal trade. Mexico employs databases like PREQUIM and SISUS for rapid traceability of regulated chemical substances, with SISUS requiring 24-hour registration of activities. New Zealand enhanced customs operations using handheld trackers and AI solutions, supported by Power BI Dashboards. Globally, Raman technology aids drug detection, with Belgium using it for initial

checks on large shipments. Cyprus employs Agilent Raman machines for safe substance analysis without opening packaging. Finland, Slovenia, and Hungary also use Raman tech, while Italy uses portable devices at airports. Switzerland collaborates with the national Forensic Science Laboratory, and New Zealand's First Defender device is paired with a dedicated lab for thorough testing.

Conclusions

The complexities and challenges of drug production, trafficking, and organised crime have evolved with digitalisation and encryption. The consequences of these trends include public health crises, corruption, and violence. In response, countries and organisations have enacted laws and policies, as well as developed innovative technologies, to combat drug-related issues. However, more comprehensive and collaborative efforts are needed to effectively address the global drug problem.

Based on the comprehensive information and shared practices, it can be inferred that the impacts of drug production, trafficking, and organised crime have a nexus with a threefold set of finding:

Trends and Consequences

- The rise of digitalisation and encrypted communications has enabled drug traffickers to evade law enforcement and increased drug production, trafficking, and organised crime.
- Shift in trafficking methods through the use of large-scale containers and postal shipments, and advanced concealment methods, has complicated drug detection and enforcement.
- Corruption and violence are widespread, supporting drug trafficking and perpetuating public health crises.
- The increasing production and use of NPS have exploited regulatory gaps and cryptocurrency use, making it challenging to track and intercept drug shipments.
- The collaboration between Chinese, Mexican, and Colombian cartels with North American gangs has worsened public health crises and increased drug-related violence.
- The increase of health crisis and the abuse of drugs, particularly opioids and cocaine, has led to a surge in overdose deaths and addiction.

Regional and Country-specific Developments

- The EU faces organised crime, corruption, and violence, with drug smuggling thriving due to high demand and profitability.
- Social media aids illegal drug sales and gang recruitment in the U.S., while Canadian groups traffic cocaine and fentanyl.
- Synthetic drug labs keep emerging, and new routes for methamphetamine and synthetic opioids are developing from Central Asia to Eastern Europe
- West Africa region is becoming a key cocaine transit hub.
- Corruption and vulnerabilities at airports have worsened risks, impacting security efforts across Europe.

Law Enforcement and Technological Developments

- Numerous countries have enacted laws and policies to combat drug production and trafficking and continue to engage into interesting initiatives and networks in order to make their implementation as effective as possible.
- INTERPOL, EUROPOL, SELEC, and individual countries have employed innovative tools and technologies, such as AI, Raman technology, and advanced analysers, to detect and track drug activity.

Annex 2. International legal frameworks

- **Regulation EC n°111/2005 (mod. By Regulation EC n°1259/2013)**: art.26, 3bis "catch all clause" for precursors and substances frequently used for the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.
- United Nations **Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances**
- Council of Europe **Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters**
- **Naples II Convention (Customs)**
- Council of Europe **Convention on Cybercrime** (Budapest Convention)
- **European Council Framework Decision on the European arrest warrant and the surrender procedures between Member States**
- **European Union Directive 2014/41/EU regarding European Investigation Order in criminal matters**
- European Council **Framework Decision on joint investigation teams**
- **Regulation EC n°273/2004 (precursors categories)**
- **Europol Convention** (Art.K.3 of the Treaty on European Union, on the establishment of a European Police Office – cf. SIENA messages)
- **1988 U.N. Convention** Table I and II updates
- E.U. **Voluntary Monitoring List of Non-Scheduled substances**
- I.N.C.B. **Limited International Special Surveillance List** (ISSL – Official Use Only)