

Key Features of Most Threatening Criminal Networks in the EU

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News

At the beginning of April 2024, Europol [presented its first report](#) on the most threatening criminal networks operating in the EU. With the aim of deepening our understanding of the key characteristics of these networks, the report "[Decoding the EU's most threatening criminal networks](#)" identifies 821 criminal networks that represent the highest threat to the EU's internal security. It is based on a dataset designed specifically for the purpose of the report, which EU Member States and third countries contributed to.

According to the report, these 821 networks are active in a range of crime areas: drug trafficking, fraud, property crime, migrant smuggling, and trafficking in human beings (THB), etc. Drug trafficking, however, remains the major activity, with more than 50% of the networks involved in it and 36% even having a singular focus on this area of crime. Each of the 821 networks is unique, varying significantly in terms of composition, structure, criminal activity, territorial control, longevity, types of cooperation, and a range of other dimensions. Nevertheless, some key capabilities stand out as determining characteristics. Having decoded the ABCD of these networks, the report identified the following four common traits:

- **Agile:** 86% of the most threatening criminal networks are able to extensively infiltrate and misuse legal business structures (LBS). This helps their criminal business thrive, launder their criminal profits, and shield them from detection. They implement growth and survival strategies (e.g., countermeasures or corruptive practices to obtain information on law enforcement investigations or to influence judicial proceedings) that sustain them over long periods of time. Underscoring this finding, 34% of the most threatening criminal networks have been active for over 10 years. Furthermore, such networks also respond swiftly to new opportunities and challenges (e.g., new technologies), including those posed by law enforcement. Strong cohesion among network members is another key success factor for these networks.
- **Borderless:** The most threatening criminal networks have an international and often global reach, but they tend to limit their criminal activity to a region or a limited number of countries. 76% of the most threatening criminal networks are present/active in two to seven countries. The composition of networks is very international, with nationals from all EU Member States and many other countries around the world cooperating within the networks. Hence, 68% of networks are composed of members with multiple nationalities.
- **Controlling:** The most threatening criminal networks tend to specialise in one main criminal business and operate with a large degree of independence. They are characterised by a strong leadership that is often located close to operations but can also keep command remotely from global locations. Con-

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sequently, the leadership of 82% of the most threatening criminal networks is settled either in the main country of activity or in the country of origin of the key members.

- **Destructive:** As mentioned above, half of the most threatening criminal networks are involved in drug trafficking as their main activity. 71% of these networks engage in corruption to facilitate criminal activity or obstruct law enforcement or judicial proceedings. While 32% do not use violence to avoid detection by law, most networks use violence and intimidation as an inherent feature of their modus operandi. Furthermore, some of the most threatening criminal networks recruit members, even minors, from a section of the young and vulnerable population. These methods have a severe impact on the EU, its citizens, and society.

Europol stressed that information on these common traits identified in the report can be used as follows:

- As a starting point for further analysis and action;
- To enable policy-makers to make informed strategic decisions;
- To help law enforcement target the most threatening criminal actors active in the EU.

Welcoming the report, on 13 June 2024, the [Council invited](#) the EU Member States, the European Commission, and Europol to build on the results of the report, to further develop the intelligence picture on high-risk criminal networks, and to further ensure an effective policy response to the threat posed by these networks through strategic, tactical, and operational measures.

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