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LIMITE

ENFOCUSTOM 55

CRIMORG 61

UD 78

COLAC 35

COTRA 3

UK 54

JAIEX 37

JAI 457

FRONTEX

EPPO

EUROPOL

NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Addressing organised customs crime in transatlantic relationships: EU-United Kingdom, EU-North America and EU- Latin America and the Caribbean

Organised customs crime remains a dynamic and adaptable threat to the EU internal market and citizen safety. The 2025 Customs Threat Assessment and the EU Serious Organised Crime Assessment address it also in the context of transatlantic relations. In order to respond effectively, the EU must forge stronger partnerships, enhance digital and operational capabilities and develop forward-looking strategies aligned with regional dynamics. The aim of this discussion paper is to promote concrete actions in cooperation, intelligence and capacity-building with partners in the United Kingdom, North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).

I. EU-United Kingdom

Post-Brexit changes have led to regulatory divergence, creating vulnerabilities in the detection and enforcement of customs-related crimes. Despite Brexit, the UK remains an indispensable partner for trade and customs intelligence. Coordination is essential to mitigate regulatory divergence. Close cooperation is vital to ensure frictionless, lawful trade while detecting criminal abuse.

The impact on EU security includes loopholes in border controls which may lead to an influx of illegal goods¹, funding EU-based criminal networks and undermining sanctions imposed on Russia². Threats for the EU include drug smuggling to and through UK ports³, tobacco smuggling, pharmaceutical counterfeiting, VAT fraud, including missing trader fraud, fictitious exports/imports and illicit waste shipments⁴.

Key criminal actors and networks involve UK and EU-based organised crime groups (OCGs) to exploit simplified procedures post-Brexit, the use of small parcel services for illegal shipments or fraudulent traders exploiting customs declarations.

Challenges and the future outlook for the EU include legal and regulatory misalignment, data fragmentation and reduced access to UK customs databases, and political sensitivities.

Areas for improvement may include the restoration and expansion of shared customs intelligence frameworks for high-risk goods and routes, increased coordination through bilateral task forces, and joint technological investment (e.g. blockchain tracking and AI-driven analysis).

II. EU-North America (US and Canada)

The United States and Canada are strategic trade and security partners. The EU-North America trade corridor is marked by high-volume legal trade, which criminal networks exploit for smuggling operations. The sophistication of OCGs in the United States and Canada often mirrors the EU's own, allowing for complex transatlantic trafficking networks. North American links facilitate funding for EU-based criminal networks.

¹ <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/26480066/southampton-seaside-drugs-cartels-cocaine-battle-control/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/dec/04/global-investigation-exposes-alleged-billion-dollar-russian-money-laundering-network>

³ <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/nca-and-border-force-make-record-breaking-5-7-tonne-cocaine-seizure>

⁴ <https://www.ban.org/news/2024/4/16/uk-firm-to-pay-over-1m-for-illegal-waste-exports-to-poland>

Threats for the EU include drug trafficking (especially cocaine and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl)¹, intellectual property violations², smuggling of high-value consumer and luxury goods, and trade-based money laundering³.

Key criminal actors and networks involve transnational drug cartels operating through maritime and air cargo, dual-continent gangs exploiting differences in regulatory regimes or the use of digital platforms and darknet for illicit trade⁴.

Challenges and the future outlook include an increased role of encrypted communication and cryptocurrency to enable anonymous transactions, cross-border illicit finance and money laundering, difficulties in aligning data-sharing and regulatory frameworks and a greater use of 'clean' companies for front operations.

Areas for improvement may include enhanced data interoperability in digital customs risk analysis tools and intelligence exchange, more joint customs operations targeting container shipments, and expanding shared EU-US/Canada training programmes and capacity-building initiatives.

III. EU-Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)

EU customs interests in LAC include trade, environmental sustainability and security. The EU-LAC corridor is a major route for cocaine and precursor chemicals. Illicit goods move through complex trade routes, including free trade zones to disguise illicit flows⁵. Weak institutional capacity in some LAC countries increases risk. The main threats for the EU include large-scale cocaine shipments concealed in container traffic⁶.

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/world/americas/canada-fentanyl-increase-organized-crime-00886863>

² <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/local-media-release/3-shipments-containing-3165-counterfeit-items-worth-over-31m-seized>

³ <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/news/33-arrests-action-against-globally-active-money-laundering-network>

⁴ <https://apnews.com/article/drug-seizures-justice-bondi-florida-coast-guard-044497148e47400c32575ed583b74032>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/26/colon-panama-counterfeiting-contraband-cocaine>

⁶ <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/cocaine-trafficking-from-latin-america-to-europe-on-the-rise>

Key criminal actors involve cartel-linked logistics networks, corruption within port authorities and customs services facilitating smuggling chains, exploiting customs loopholes and weak border controls, and dual EU-LAC criminal entities using shell companies to obscure trade¹.

LAC trafficking routes have a significant impact on EU security and serve as major conduits for drug-related violence within the Union². Corrupt networks undermine the rule of law and border safety.

Key risks and threats to the EU include the expansion of poly-criminal networks operating across multiple regions, undermining sanctions imposed on Russia, cyber-enabled customs fraud and e-commerce-based trafficking, and the undermining of fiscal revenues through VAT and excise fraud.

Challenges and the future outlook include limited interoperability of customs systems, insufficient law enforcement capacity in LAC countries or the rising use of legal trade routes for laundering¹¹.

Areas for improvement may involve targeted investment in LAC customs modernisation, long-term joint customs training and mentorship or support to enhance integrity and anti-corruption measures, or stronger engagement with regional organisations such as CARICOM and CELAC.

The European Commission, Europol and Frontex prepared the information in the attachment(s) *(to be added)*.

Questions to facilitate the discussion

1. Which customs regulatory and infrastructure limitations exacerbate enforcement gaps?
2. Are the mutual administrative assistance agreements and working groups responsive enough to fast-evolving threats? Could customs liaison officers or data-sharing platforms be institutionalised or intensified?
3. Could joint training or workshops enhance investigative and inspection capacities?

¹ https://insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Mapping-and-profiling-HRCN_LAC.pdf

² <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-drug-gangs-torture-rooms-arm-kids-kalashnikov-eu-agency-emcdda-warn/>