

The SOCTA: a tool for prioritising the fight against serious and organised crime in the EU

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In 2010, the EU established a multi-annual policy cycle ⁽¹⁾ on serious and organised crime in order to tackle the most important criminal threats in a coherent and methodological manner. This would be through optimum cooperation between the relevant services of the EU Member States, EU institutions and EU agencies, as well as relevant third countries and organisations. The next cycle starts in 2013 with the delivery of the SOCTA (Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment) and the development of the EMPACT (European Multidisciplinary Platform against Criminal Threats) (see below) for the period 2013 -2017.

SOCTA

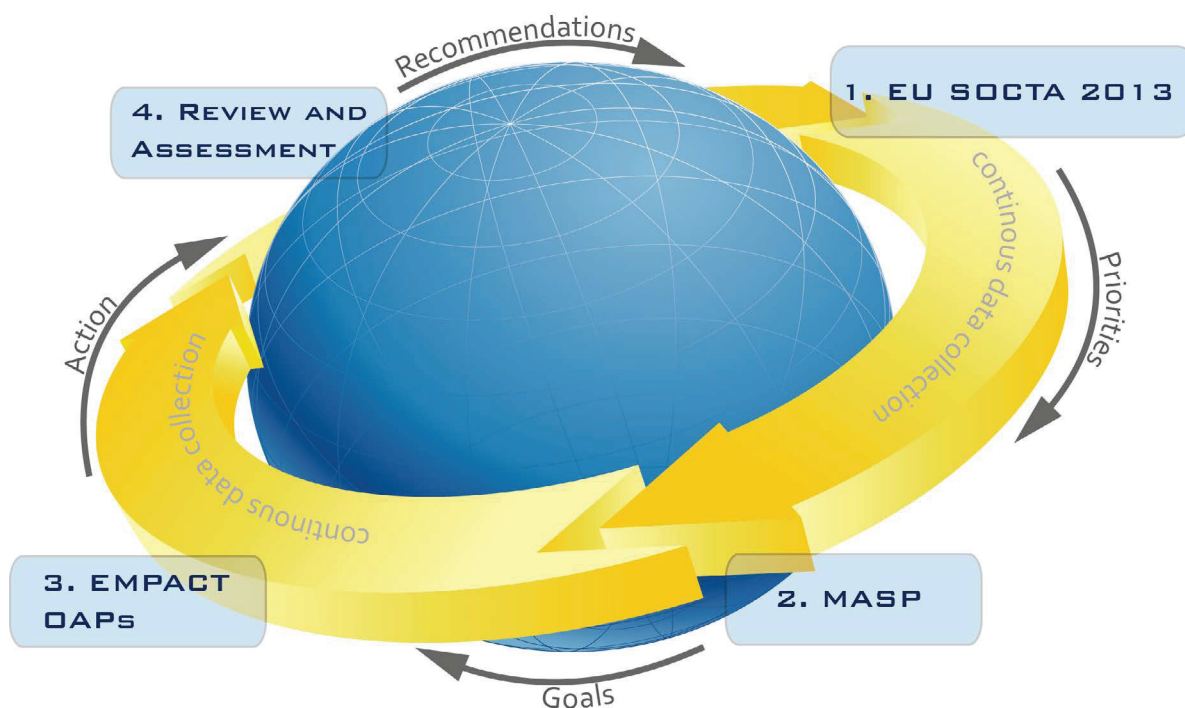
The starting point of this four-year EU policy cycle is thus the **SOCTA**. In the SOCTA, Europol will deliver criminal analysis findings that can be translated into political priorities, strategic goals and operational action plans in order to implement EU policy. The link between the SOCTA conclusions and the definition of priorities is very important. Taking this step in an intelligence-led way ensures that analysis directly informs political decision-making, and that the EU's most-relevant criminal threats are addressed.

The full policy cycle will start in 2013 and will last for four years. It consists of four key steps, which are:

- **Step 1: SOCTA** — the serious and organised crime threat assessment, developed by Europol, will deliver a set of recommendations based on an in-depth analysis of the major crime threats facing the EU. The Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council will use these recommendations to define its priorities for the next four years (2013-2017).
- **Step 2: MASP** — Multi-annual Strategic Action Plans (MASP) will be developed from the priorities and will define the strategic goals for combating each priority threat.
- **Step 3: EMPACT** — will set out concrete operational plans (OAPs) for combating the priority threats. OAPs will include Joint Investigation Teams (JIT) and target analysis followed by investigations.
- **Step 4: review and assessment** — the effectiveness of the OAPs and their impact on the priority threats will be judged by COSI ⁽²⁾. In 2015, an interim assessment (SOCTA) will be prepared by Europol to evaluate, monitor and adjust (if required) the efforts to tackle priority threats.

⁽¹⁾ Council Conclusions on the creation and implementation of an EU policy cycle for organised and serious international crime, doc. 15358/10 COSI 69 ENFOPOL 298 CRIMORG 185 ENFOCUS-TOM 94.

⁽²⁾ COSI: Standing Committee on Operational Cooperation on Internal Security.



The role of the SOCTA in this policy cycle is thus an important one. The JHA Council will base its decisions on a limited number of priorities defined in this assessment, both regional and pan-European. These priorities will thereupon again play a role in Europol's activities, through the organisation's involvement in the resulting Operational Action Plans.

As such Europol has come a long way from the organised crime situation reports (OCSR) produced from 1994 when Europol still was the Europol Drugs Unit, via the organised crime reports (OCR) from 2002 that, for the first time, included a section on threats, and the organised crime threat assessments (OCTA) produced from 2006 to 2011. This development is reflecting the increasing confidence of Member States in Europol both as an organisation, and as a provider of sound analytical products in particular, to which the role as a policy advisor can be entrusted.

The SOCTA will, like its immediate predecessor the OCTA, be a forward-looking document, with a primary focus on future developments in criminal threats. Europol will both analyse trends and patterns in current crime data and look further, scanning the environment for other factors that will influence crime across the four years of the policy cycle. This will provide the basis

for an evidential forecast of future threats to EU internal security.

The analysis underpinning the development of priorities will also support the planning of operational actions.

Intelligence analysis versus scientific research

Intelligence analysis, and thus the SOCTA analysis, is different from scientific research. In the latter the principal aim is to acquire knowledge on a chosen subject. With intelligence analysis the objective is to facilitate effective interventions. Here the aim is to find out what has happened, is happening now or could happen in the future. This has a bearing on the recognition and interpretation of indicators for specific situations and developments. There are other differences which set analysis apart from research, such as the need for speed, secrecy and professional trust.

EMPACT — where we are today

For the interim period, prior to the full policy cycle of 2013-2017, an initial, reduced cycle has been initiated. The 2011 OCTA provided the basis on which the Council decided on eight serious and organised crime (SOC) priorities for 2011-2013. In line with the full cycle, these priorities have been translated into MASPs, EMPACT (OAPs) and ultimately coordinated and ongoing actions by EU Member States and EU organisations against the identified threats to EU security.

Improvements in cooperation are already being seen in the current priority areas with joint operations and investigations now being increasingly run.

Information from these investigations is sent to Europol via its secure system, SIENA, to be analysed via Europol's unique system of the Analysis Workfile (AWF) ⁽³⁾. This will help inform the conclusions of the 2013 SOCTA.

The data for the SOCTA is originating from Europol's AWF on serious and organised crime, MS and third-partner contributions. The SOCTA uses a holistic approach towards open-source material. Not all available sources will be used, but none is immediately

discarded, except for suspicious sources, tabloid press articles or similar. At the beginning of August 2012, a questionnaire was forwarded to all partners, with a deadline for contributions of end of October 2012.

The work to be done for the SOCTA will reach a crescendo in the last months of 2012 and the months immediately preceding the launch date, when all the information from Member States, third countries and other contributors needs to be collected, evaluated, collated, integrated and interpreted, and then translated into a report that will clearly identify the most important challenges for law enforcement authorities in Member States in the coming years. The SOCTA report will be published at the beginning of March 2013.

Postscriptum:

The SOCTA 2017 will be published (or 'was published' depending on the date of the publication) on 9 March 2017.

The EU Justice and Home Affairs Council will decide on the new crime priorities in June 2017. The implementation of the new operational actions will start January 2018.

⁽³⁾ AWF: an AWF is a database on a specific crime area, which is intrinsically linked to specific forms of operational support offered by Europol. In effect an AWF is the only existing legal tool at European level to store, process and analyse factual information ('hard' data) and in particular 'intelligence' (or 'soft' data) at the same time, including personal data of a sensitive nature. Once information is received within an Analysis Work File, Europol will make sure that all the data is made available for analysis. This means, to start with, that data is processed in a structured way so it can be continuously exploited and enhanced.