

Europe challenges organised crime

A new Europol threat assessment will focus efforts to tackle rising gang crime in the EU, reports **Hugo Brady** of the Centre of European Reform

Cross-border crime is on the rise in an enlarging European Union. Criminals, especially organised gangs, are now exploiting the lowering of national barriers to EU trade: travelling to commit crimes, increasing their illegitimate profits and escaping punishment.

As the EU has expanded, criminals have moved quickly to take advantage of new markets for people, drugs and stolen property. Each year, over 100,000 women and children are trafficked across EU borders. Counterfeiting of the euro is also increasing.

In 2004, nearly a million counterfeit euro banknotes were seized, with a value of over €45 million, a rise of nearly 30 per cent compared with the previous year.

The leaders of the 25 governments have grappled with how best to respond to this rise. Police co-operation in Europe used to operate on a case-by-case basis dealing with drug shipments or helping to track down infamous terrorists like Carlos the Jackal or the Palestinian terror group Black September.

But the governments have decided that co-operation has been too reactive and incoherent, mostly pursuing criminals after

they have committed their crimes. They want to smash the criminal networks before they can do their damage. Hence, for the first time, in May 2006, they produced – on the basis of the shared intelligence of their police forces – a European-wide organised crime threat assessment.

The governments need this threat assessment to decide which gangs need tackling most urgently. They will then instruct their police chiefs to hammer out plans for several major joint operations against established crime networks, perhaps dealing in drugs or human trafficking, for example.

The threat assessment was put together by Europol, the EU's police agency in The Hague – not to be confused with Interpol, which is a separate police organisation with a global focus and over 180 members. Europol handles criminal intelligence and supports investigations conducted by law enforcement officers in EU countries when they have a cross-border element. The agency is divided into two main sections: one consisting of offices staffed by seconded officers from the 25 member-states; the other is the agency's central analysis unit which combines information from

the member-states to create a European-wide picture of the organised crime activity.

Europol's intelligence is becoming increasingly useful. For example, in December 2005 the agency helped break a clandestine smuggling ring that had brought thousands of illegal immigrants into the EU. Raids were carried out simultaneously across five countries – France, Italy, Britain, Greece and Turkey – and suspects were successfully caught.

That same month, its experts helped the Hungarian National Bureau of Investigations to smash a Hungarian gang that was forging €50 banknotes (about 2,000 notes were seized as well as technical equipment).

Gangs like these often commit their crimes in one country with their leadership safely based in another. They also usually hold their financial assets in a third country which has strict banking secrecy rules.

By agreeing the common threats, Europe's police forces aim to dismantle these increasingly sophisticated networks. This will throw down the gauntlet to organised crime and send an important message to Europe's crime bosses. ■