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Europol Innovation Lab

Progress Report and Strategic Priorities 2024-2025

Executive Summary

The new Europol Strategy adopted by the Management Board in June 2023 confirms that being "at the forefront of law enforcement innovation" remains a strategic priority for Europol. This reflects a continuing commitment to the priority already expressed in the Europol Strategy 2020+ as well as the addition of important new tasks to the Europol mandate with the revision of the Europol Regulation in relation to research and innovation.

While Europol's strategy recognises that innovation must be embraced across all Europol services, the Europol Innovation Lab (C3-12) has a central role in coordinating activities related to research and innovation as well as promoting and nurturing innovation across the agency.

In fulfilling these responsibilities, the Innovation Lab has made significant progress in the relatively short time since it was established and has built up considerable momentum in terms of the relationships established, processes and policies developed, and projects underway. Particular milestones achieved since the last strategic report to the Management Board in March 2022[1] include: the launch of an innovation low-value grant for EU MS, the creation of four (4) additional Core and Strategic Groups under the auspices of the EuCB[2], the publication of four (4) technology monitoring reports and the addition of more than twenty (20) innovative tools to the Europol Tool Repository (ETR).

Looking ahead, the most important strategic priority for the Innovation Lab is the establishment and operationalisation of the Research and Innovation Sandbox to train algorithms on operational data as foreseen in Articles 18 and 33 of the revised Europol Regulation, and announced to the MB in March 2022[3]. Emphasis is placed on this initiative because it will be an enabling function: it will establish a legal and technical environment in which Europol and the MS competent authorities will be able to co-create, test, validate and refine innovation solutions with which to face operational challenges.

Other priorities for the coming two years include: the further establishment of Europol's role in Horizon Europe[4] to help ensure that investments result in benefits for frontline law enforcement work; the proactive alignment of Europol processes with the future requirements of the EU AI Act; the acquisition of a professional technological solution to facilitate technology scanning, monitoring, and foresight activities, to continue strengthening cooperation with academia and to further the integration of the Innovation

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[1] EDOC#1207378v6: Europol Innovation Lab Annual Activity Report 2021, 28 February 2022.

[2] European Clearing Board for Innovation.

[3] EDOC#1207378v6: Europol Innovation Lab Annual Activity Report 2021, 28 February 2022.

[4] The EU funding programme for research and innovation, including in the field of internal security.

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Lab activities with other IMU functions, especially on biometrics and the promotion of adoption of tools to increase the degree of automation in the pre-processing phase.

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1. Introduction

The Europol Strategy 2020+ introduced a new strategic priority for the agency, to be "at the forefront of law enforcement innovation". Establishing an Innovation Lab at Europol was the central measure undertaken by the Europol Executive Director to achieve this strategic priority.

The Management Board last held a focused discussion on the Europol Innovation Lab on 15-16 March 2022[5], when it reviewed progress achieved in 2021 and priorities for 2022.

Since then, there have been two very important developments in Europol's strategy and mandate:

- The new Europol Strategy adopted by the Management Board in June 2023 confirms that being "at the forefront of law enforcement innovation" remains a strategic priority for Europol.

- Two of the most important novelties introduced in the revised Europol Regulation, which became applicable in July 2022, are in the field of research and innovation:

  o Article 18 now allows Europol to process information, including personal data, for research and innovation projects. This is further specified in Article 33a, according to which Europol is to create a separate, isolated and protected data processing environment within Europol for the sole purpose of carrying out research and innovation projects (which require the processing of personal data). Access to this data shall be granted only to specifically authorised staff of Europol and, subject to technical security measures, to specifically authorised staff of Member States' competent authorities and Union agencies.

  o Article 4a ascribes to Europol a new role within the Horizon Europe framework. According to these changes, Europol is set to "proactively monitor research and innovation activities that are relevant for the achievement of Europol's objectives". Europol is to "contribute to such activities by supporting related activities of Member States and by implementing its own research and innovation activities, including projects for the development, training, testing and validation of algorithms for the development of specific tools for the use by law enforcement authorities, and disseminate the results of the activities to the Member States in accordance with Article 67".

The next three chapters of the report describe the main functions of the Lab, also reflecting the organisational structure of the three offices. Each chapter has a first section reporting on the progress achieved in 2022 and the first half of 2023, in relation to the priorities discussed in March 2022 as well as other developments. The second part of each chapter looks ahead, describing what is planned to support Europol's overall strategic priority in innovation, and explaining how these plans fit within Europol's overall programming, ICT planning and other resource implications.

This report was presented to the Corporate Matters and Information Management Working Groups for their meetings on 12-14 September 2023. The Working Groups invited Europol to submit the report to the Management Board for discussion.

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[5] EDOC#1207378v6: Europol Innovation Lab Annual Activity Report 2021, 28 February 2022
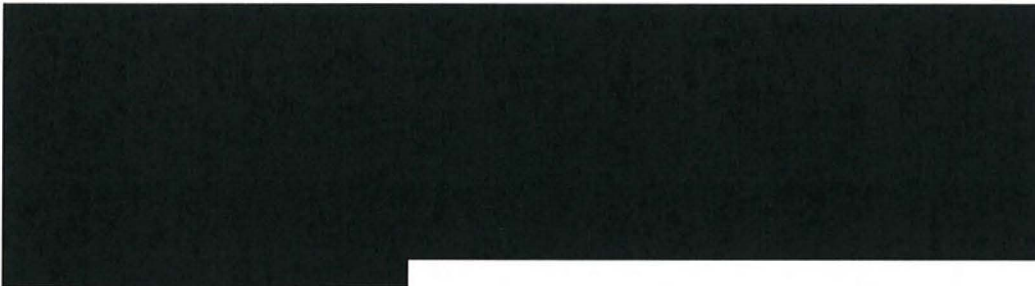
2. Delivering the operational benefits of innovation: the Projects Function (Office 2)

2.1.   Progress Q1 2022 to Q2 2023

Research & Innovation (R&I) Sandbox

As previously announced to the HENUs and MB WG IM in autumn 2022[6], Europol has worked on the development of the policies and the compliance with the regulatory requirements to create the technical environment (the Research & Innovation Sandbox or **'R&I Sandbox'''**) necessary to enable Europol and the Member States (MS) to process personal data for research and innovation purposes with a view to developing, training and validating AI models and tools.

On 21-23 March 2023 the Europol Management Board adopted the *"Binding document defining the general scope of the research and innovation projects (application of Article 8 of the Management Board Decision further specifying procedures for the processing of information for the purposes listed in Article 18(2) (e) of the Europol Regulation"*[7]. The document lists the R&I projects that Europol intends to launch in the R&I Sandbox in the future. In accordance with the revised Europol Regulation, the Binding Document was shared with the EDPS for information.

Furthermore, the Lab outlined the rules for the appropriate and compliant use of the R&I Sandbox environment in two distinct policies: one for the part of the R&I Sandbox that is able to process personal operational data[10] and one for the process of non-personal and non-operational datasets[11]. These policies intend to establish acceptable and prohibited uses of this R&I Sandbox environment and to protect Europol and its systems and infrastructure from illegal or harmful actions committed by users.

In parallel, the Europol Innovation Lab has started to build **a Research and Innovation Pipeline** that makes use of the new technical environment. This refers to a structured and organized process through which research and innovation activities, progress from initial idea generation to the development of new products, services, and technologies, for Europol or the MSs. This framework aims to help guide and manage the various stages involved in bringing new ideas to fruition, so that the technologies mature and get evaluated in each stage to prove that investing further to them is advantageous. A multi-stage process is envisaged, where opportunity scanning, pre-selection, and prototyping

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[6] EDOC #1261360v2: Innovation Lab Update – 3 priorities for 2022, 14 October 2022
[7] EDOC #1268633v8: Binding document defining the general scope for the research and innovation projects, 23 February 2023
[8] EDOC #1160881: Support R&I projects processing personal data (Art 33a ER) – Process Description, 10 July 2023
[9] ▮
[10] EDOC #1327390: Research & Innovation Sandbox (Personal/Operational Data Environment) Use & Management Policy, 24 July 2023
[11] EDOC #1315315: Research & Innovation Sandbox (Non-Personal/Non-Operational Data Environment) Use & Management Policy, 5 July 2023

and creation of **Proof-of-concepts (PoCs)**[12] will allow promising technologies to progress through the stages. Technologies that pass through all relevant compliance and security checking of each stage may progress to full operationalisation[13].

This strategic effort to promote concrete and organised **innovation uptake** is aimed at enhancing the maturity levels of prototypes, bringing them closer to operational use, through the utilization of the R&I Sandbox for the evaluation and improvement, and the ETR for dissemination. By leveraging the PoCs in the Research and Innovation Pipeline, the Lab and more generally of the Information Management Unit (IMU), in consultation with C1 and OD, seeks to help Europol and its Member States to drive innovation and adopt cutting-edge technologies as part of their data processing environment, ultimately enhancing their operational efficiency and effectiveness.

Europol Tool Repository (ETR)
The concept of the Europol Tool Repository (ETR) platform was presented to the HENUS in Q1 2022, along with the relevant documentation supporting the initiative[14] [15]. The ETR plays a vital role in Europol's strategy to foster innovation and to provide the basis for the collaborative creation and sharing of innovative tools among Member States. It embodies the cooperative approach of the Lab, allowing innovators at the national level to share their tools for the benefit of the European law enforcement community. The Innovation Lab via ETR establishes technology sharing as a new form of police collaboration.

ETR has achieved remarkable growth in the past 18 months. It currently holds 24 tools, supports more than 1500 users and its tools were downloaded more than 1000 times. The tools available on ETR have already supported several operations across Europe. For example, with software from ETR, national police in a Member State recently managed to locate the house where victims of human trafficking were abducted and arrested several suspects, as well as freed several other victims abused at that location.

Europol Code Repository (ECR)
The Europol Code Repository continues to provide a co-development environment for MS LEAs to securely and jointly create software solutions.

H2020 projects
Europol is involved in four H2020 projects. Three of these were granted to Europol in 2019 (AIDA, GRACE and INFINITY), and a fourth was granted in 2020 (STARLIGHT). The four awarded H2020 grants provide to Europol a total funding of 3M€, of which the total Personnel Budget was about 2,5M€ for Europol's participation for the period 2020 to 2025. Therefore, the financial/human resource incentive played an important role in motivating

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[12] These PoCs can either be outcomes of the H2020 projects, or the results of the work of Core Groups or ad hoc collaboration with academia and industry.
[13] EDOC #1301551v2: Update on the implementation of article 33a and the R&I sandbox environment, 17 April 2023
[14] EDOC #1227768: Boosting Innovation – Lab and ETR general presentation HENUs workshop, 20 April 2022
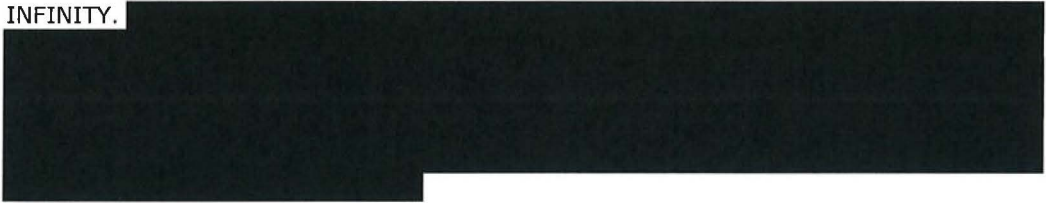[15] EDOC #1238205: Europol Tool Repository – Background note for the HENUs workshop, 6 July 2023
[16] EDOC #1311386v5: Update on the Europol Tool Repository (ETR), 12 June 2023

Europol to participate in these proposals. At the same time, the technologies developed within the projects were expected to complement Europol's technological capabilities and cover for existing technical gaps. Furthermore, the projects are interrelated, and there is complementarity in the functionalities that they are expected to provide, while the fact that some projects run longer than others, allows for the further iterative development and enhancement of the same capabilities (which aims to increase the technology readiness level).

Projects AIDA, GRACE and INFINITY are finishing in 2023. Due to the fact that Europol experienced delays in recruitment, especially of technical staff, projects AIDA and INFINITY were not adequately manned[17]. While the small team supporting them, managed to produce all the project deliverables on time and meet all contractual obligations, the difficulty in recruiting technical staff had a notable effect on Europol's technical advancements within the projects. Finally, in terms of unused personnel budget, 0.5M€ was reimbursed to the Commission for AIDA and a similar amount will also be returned for INFINITY.

Innovation Low-Value Grants (LVG)

The Innovation Lab communicated to MB WG IM in autumn 2022 the intention to set up a Low-Value Grant Scheme. This was one of the three (3) strategic priorities of the Europol Innovation Lab in 2022 and 2023[19].

Article 61 of the Agency's Regulation provides that "*Europol may award grants related to the achievement of its objectives and tasks*" including doing so "*without a call for proposals*" for performance of activities that fall within Europol's objectives and tasks". Therefore, in 2023, the Lab has set up and communicated the Innovation Low-Value Grant Scheme.

The LVG is an agile funding channel for the Core and Strategic Groups of the EuCB that enables the co-development of services and tools for the benefit of the whole European law enforcement community. Core Group projects which will be supported by the Innovation LVG should aim to deliver tangible and innovative results (e.g. tools, technical solutions, methodologies, processes, etc.), solve specific operational needs of at least two EUMS and facilitate wide sharing of results to the European law enforcement community (e.g. by sharing the new tool on the Europol Tool Repository). Each application may request a maximum amount of €60,000. For 2023, an overall budget of €125,000 is available.

2.2.   Projects Function - Strategic Priorities 2024-2025

The **Research & Innovation Sandbox** holds paramount strategic significance as it will enable Europol to fulfil its role in leading Law Enforcement Innovation. The timely implementation of this new secure environment for testing and development using operational data, in line with the requirements of the amended ER, will serve as a precondition and enabler for numerous depending initiatives. This infrastructural foundation acts as a catalyst, driving research and innovation projects, while ensuring compliance and risk mitigation. Its central role supports the realization of EuCB Core Group and LVG outcomes, maximizes the possibility for validation and possible exploitation of EU funded deliverables, and fosters technical LEA collaboration. By having a secure isolated

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[17] EDOC #1222561

[18] ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

[19] EDOC #1261360v2: Innovation Lab Update – 3 priorities for 2022, 14 October 2022

environment, the safeguarding of data, compliance, and optimisation of resources can be achieved. This unique infrastructure in Europe becomes an essential backbone for future LEA innovations, positioning Europol for sustained growth and success in the future.

Apart from preparation of the policies and processes to comply with the regulatory framework, the Lab will continue to **work with ICT to develop the technical environment, which will host the R&I Sandbox**. The implementation is planned in phases, subject to ICT work plan prioritisation.
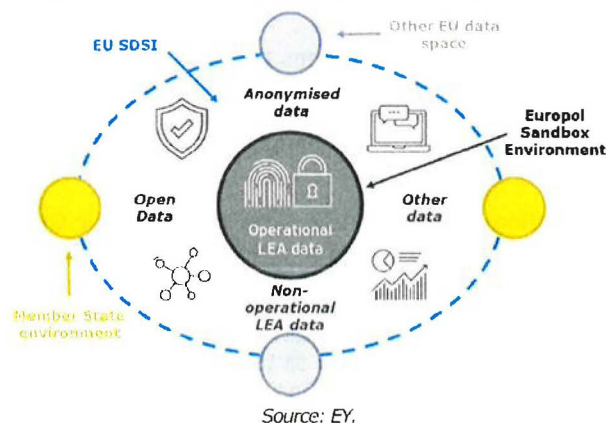
Two distinct use cases have been identified in order to cover the immediate needs, and they form the scope of the first phase of the implementation, planned to be delivered in 2023 (in line with the ICT Work Plan of 2023). These are the following:
- Using an R&I Sandbox environment without external access and without using personal data.
- Using an R&I Sandbox environment without external access but using personal data.

The environment for both use cases will be delivered in 2023. In the next phase of implementation, planned for 2024, the provision of the access from outside Europol networks will be investigated, and if needed designed and implemented.

The Europol R&I Sandbox has also the potential to become **the core of the future EU Security Data Space for Innovation (EU SDSI).** The EU SDSI is an ambitious project stemming from the European Union Strategy for Data, which foresees the creation of EU-wide common and interoperable data spaces in all strategic sectors[20]. In line with this planned work, both DG Home and EY[21] highlighted the strategic importance of the Europol R&I Sandbox.[22]

Figure 4: Larger ecosystem of sandbox environments in the area of law enforcement

Source: EY.

The Lab plans to further **develop the Innovation Pipeline concept and further refine relevant ICT governance**, in close consultation with C1 and OD[23]. This is also in close alignment with the new Europol Strategy, particularly its strategic objective to be at the forefront of law enforcement innovation and research by, among other measures, stimulating a culture of innovation across Europol[24]. It further serves the implementation of Europol's Information Management Strategy, particularly objective four: ensuring

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[20] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/strategy-data

[21] Formerly Ernst and Young

[22] Study to Support the technical, legal and financial conceptualisation of a European Security Data Space for Innovation, p. 6, 22 February 2023, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-02/Data%20spaces%20study_0.pdf

[23] EDOC #1301551v2: Update on the implementation of article 33a and the R&I sandbox environment, 17 April 2023

[24] EDOC #1299861v1: Europol Strategy – Delivering Security in Partnership, 14 June 2023

alignment between innovation and information management for the purposes of seizing opportunities in AI[25].

In 2024 and 2025, the Lab intends to continue working on **more proof-of-concepts (PoCs)** and to improve **the innovation uptake**, in consultation with C1 and OD, to ensure that new innovative solutions can become part of the Europol data processing environment.

The **growth of Europol Tool Repository (ETR)** is set to be accelerated through strategic plans that encompass the upgrade of selected popular ETR tools and the enhancement of the ETR platform itself. These endeavours aim to strengthen Europol's capacity to deliver cutting-edge technologies to LEAs while facilitating increased promotion, adoption and usage across the LE community. By continuously offering new and innovative solutions, ETR seeks to expand its user base, fostering greater collaboration and sharing of tools among LEAs. Through these initiatives, ETR is positioned to play a pivotal role in advancing the capabilities of law enforcement agencies leading to more operational successes.

In addition, the **Europol Code Repository (ECR)** also anticipates steady growth in the foreseeable future. This foreseen growth is directly supported by Europol's commitment to provide continuous operational support for the co-creation of new technologies.

As the **EU AI Act** comes into effect, it is imperative for **Europol to proactively prepare and align its processes with the new regulation**. The Innovation Lab aims to work on this in consultation with G2, C1 and OD, as well as DPF. This new legislation is expected to apply to several current and upcoming technologies used by Europol. Embracing compliance will not only uphold legal requirements but also demonstrate a commitment to ethical and responsible AI development. Adequate preparation will enable the organisation to navigate the evolving AI landscape, mitigate potential risks, and seize opportunities for innovation while building trust among stakeholders and users. Timely and comprehensive preparations are essential to ensure a smooth transition to the new regulatory framework and to continue leveraging AI technologies effectively in the future.

Finally, the Lab will continue to implement the Innovation LVG designed to act as foundation for the practical implementation of prototypes and use cases. These grants are strategically aimed at engaging EuCB Core Groups as their primary audience, fostering the conditions for collaborative technology innovation. By providing targeted financial support, Europol aspires to fuel the co-creation of cutting-edge technologies, amplifying the impact of the EUCB collective efforts.

3. Preparing the law enforcement community for the impacts of emerging technologies: the Observatory Function (Office 3)

3.1. Progress Q1 2022 – Q2 2023

Technology monitoring and foresight activities

The Innovation Lab's Observatory has further enhanced and continuously carried out **technology monitoring and foresight activities**. These have resulted in the provision of technology expertise and the production of several technology assessments, including:

- "Facing Reality? Law Enforcement and the Challenge of Deepfakes"
- "Policing in the Metaverse: What Law Enforcement Needs to Know"

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[25] EDOC #1132850v13: Information Management Strategy for Europol, December 2020.

- "Public report: ChatGPT – The Impact of Large Language Models on Law Enforcement"
- "Law enforcement-only report: ChatGPT – The Impact of Large Language Models on Law Enforcement"

In line with the Europol Information Management Strategy objective four[26], ensuring alignment between innovation and information management, the findings of these reports have been presented to a wide variety of stakeholders and led to a range of practical follow-up actions. Among other outcomes, the Observatory has provided **technology expertise to Operations Department** by contributing to two O1-23 Strategic Analysis reports (Futures Report and EFECTA), organised dedicated **foresight workshops** for operational experts, and provided input to subject matter experts (i.e., AP TWINS).

This objective has further been implemented through the Observatory's technology scanning activities, including the organisation of dedicated foresight events and **Europol TechWatch Forums**, with topics including foresight, disinformation, the Metaverse, biometric vulnerabilities, and quantum technologies.
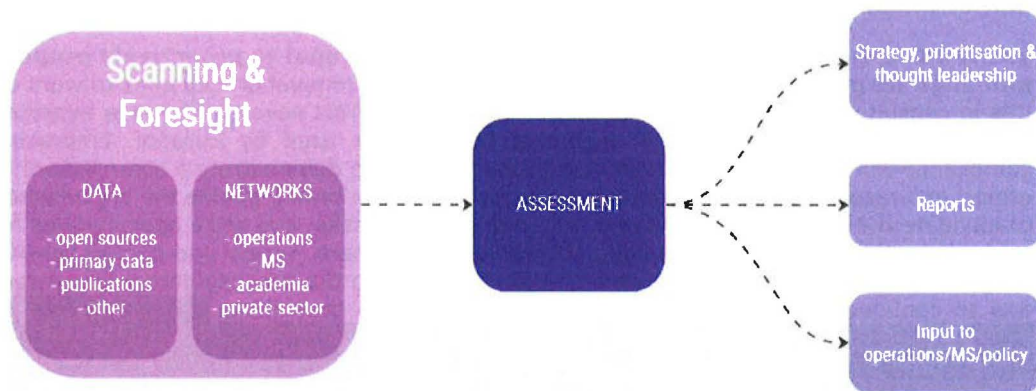

Figure 1: Technology expertise generated by the Observatory.

Strategic Groups

The Observatory has additionally helped establish and manage the three **Strategic Groups of the European Clearing Board,** all of which have achieved concrete deliverables:

- The **Strategic Group on AI** has become a leading group of experts on artificial intelligence, which has engaged in concerted efforts aimed at being the voice of EU law enforcement in discussions related to the proposed AI Act.
- The **Strategic Group on Horizon Scanning & Technology Foresight** was established with Europol acting as one of the co-Chairs. The group has created a technology scanning function, as well as tested and delivered a standardised foresight methodology for the benefit of EU law enforcement.
- The **Strategic Group on Ethics** has established an ethics assessment methodology and a first version of a law enforcement ethics manifest.

The Observatory has additionally monitored and actively contributed to a number of research and innovation projects, including AP4AI[27] and STARLIGHT.

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[26] EDOC #1132850v13: Information Management Strategy for Europol, December 2020.

[27] AP4AI is a multi-agency project led under the auspices of the EU Innovation Hub for Internal Security, which is designed to guide internal security practitioners through the evaluation of the compliance of their internal processes when developing and deploying AI tools with the 12 AI accountability principles. www.ap4ai.eu See part 4.1 of this report.

3.2.   Observatory function - Strategic priorities 2024-2025

The strategic priorities of the Observatory focus on further advancing the Innovation Lab's technology expertise and strategic foresight capabilities for the benefit of Europol and the wider EU law enforcement community. This strategic priority relies on two key success factors:

1) The **acquisition of a professional technological solution** capable of facilitating various activities related to technology scanning, monitoring, and foresight.

2) **Enhancing the Observatory's work with relevant scientific insights**, by strengthening links to key stakeholders, such as the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) and the academic community.

Planned deliverables in this regard are dedicated, in-depth **assessments on key emerging technology areas** of interest. These include the following subjects:

- Quantum computing and quantum technologies
- Biometric vulnerabilities
- Artificial intelligence
- Encryption

Following the establishment of a consolidated and holistic scanning and foresight methodology in the past reporting period, going forward the Observatory aims to leverage the expertise developed as a result by providing **guidance and thought leadership in key technology areas**. This includes, for instance, a strategic approach towards the impact of AI on law enforcement. Relevant planned activities in this area include:

- Engaging in relevant policy discussions (AI Act)
- Monitoring threats stemming from emerging AI developments (i.e., generative AI)
- Supporting law enforcement in the responsible use of AI (bias mitigation and AP4AI)

The expertise generated by the Observatory's technology scanning and foresight activities shall further be integrated more closely into the **organisational planning**. This refers to larger scale strategic exercises, as well as concrete topical activities. The expertise developed on quantum computing, will contribute to the reflection conducted by C1 on the future of the Europol ICT infrastructure in a post-quantum era. In addition, the Observatory will **help define future Horizon Europe research & development priorities** by providing **foresight** based on the input of Europol's key operational stakeholders.

The Observatory will continue **managing and supporting a number of projects**. These include the experimentation with virtual online environments, support to Horizon Europe projects (such as STARLIGHT, ENACT, AHEAD), AP4AI, and potential new activities subject to emerging developments of relevance.

While many of the Innovation Lab's activities focus on engagement with the MS competent authorities and other external stakeholders, promoting innovation within Europol remains an important priority. In order to stimulate a culture of innovation throughout Europol and foster creative thinking and close alignment between the Innovation Lab with all business areas, the Innovation Lab wishes to offer the facilitation of Innovation Design workshops as a service for other Europol colleagues to make use of: whenever a Europol Unit or Team is facing a particular challenge or seeking to redesign one of its own products or services, it can call on the Innovation Lab to design and facilitate workshops to help them to innovate and improve.

4. Coordinating innovation initiatives and promoting law enforcement innovation: the Policy & Networks Function (Office 1)

4.1. Progress Q1 2022 – Q2 2023

European Security Research and Innovation Funding Programmes (Horizon Europe)

Apart from the conditions for processing personal data for research and innovation purposes (see Chapter 2), the main novelty of the revised Europol Regulation that the Innovation Lab has been responsible for implementing is the new role of Europol in **supporting the Commission with Security Research and Innovation funding programmes (Article 4a ER).** From Q2 2022 to Q2 2023, the Innovation Lab has worked with the Commission, as well as Europol's legal and other services, to define the parameters of the new tasks. The Europol Directorate has confirmed the Lab's proposals and a robust approach is now being implemented[28]. The overall purpose of this new mandate is that Europol's expertise, resulting from direct cooperation with the MS's competent authorities, will contribute to making the funding programmes more relevant and beneficial for those same authorities. The new mandate in this area is composed of three main tasks:
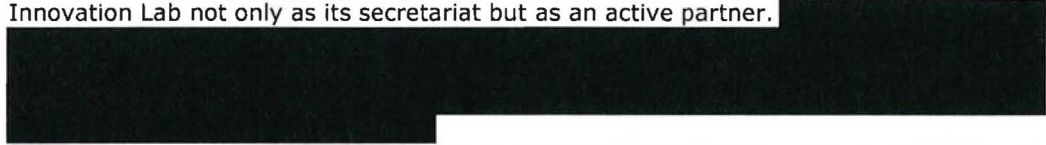
- Provide input to the Commission for the design of certain Calls for Proposals under Horizon Europe;

- Provide Europol staff members as expert evaluators for the evaluation of certain project proposals;

- Engage with project consortia, after grant agreements are signed and projects are launched, to facilitate contacts with, and represent the interests of, the law enforcement community.

Europol staff have already started providing input to the Horizon Europe Work Programmes for 2022-2023 and a "Pool of Experts" is currently being set up in order to continue this work and to gather relevant input of interest from different Europol Departments to DG HOME and to the funded projects, while ensuring the necessary involvement of the experts' hierarchies.

In parallel, the Lab has worked closely with the Commission to raise awareness within the EU-funded R&I community on Europol's changed role, for example during the Research Info Days of 2022 and 2023 on Horizon Europe and during the regular events of the CERIS community[29]. This has resulted in the development of an increasingly precise picture of funded projects of potential interest to Europol.

European Clearing Board for Innovation (EuCB)

The EuCB has further developed its activities and enjoys the full support of the Europol Innovation Lab not only as its secretariat but as an active partner.

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[28] EDOC #1303200 – Europol Pool of Experts for EU Horizon Europe (HE) funding programmes, 16 May 2023.

[29] https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/ceris-community-european-research-and-innovation-security_en

[30] EDOC# 1276572v2B: EuCB Annual Report 2022, 21 March 2023

In parallel, EuCB Single Points of Contact have continued to share experiences and promote innovative projects at national level by meeting on a regular basis. In 2022, the Plenary met once online and twice face-to-face (in The Hague and in Prague, Czech Republic). In 2023, the Plenary has already met twice (once online and once in Stockholm, Sweden). The EUCB is currently chaired by the Dutch national police and its Governance Board is composed of representatives from Germany, Portugal, Belgium and the Czech Republic.

In order to avoid any unnecessary duplication of work is undertaken, the EuCB has developed a Joint Policy on cooperating with **EU-funded Law Enforcement Networks**, which focus on bringing together European LE perspectives on specific crime areas or technologies. The Lab is closely cooperating with CYCLOPES[31], EACTDA[32], ECTEG[33], ENFSI[34], ENLETS[35], HYBNET[36] and iProcureNet[37].

The EuCB has clearly become an important stakeholder community for law enforcement innovation with a high level of trust and open discussions.

EU Innovation Hub for Internal Security

The Europol Innovation Lab continues to host, and provide most of the resources for the **EU Innovation Hub for Internal Security**. This – still virtual[38] – entity brings together the research and innovation actors of several EU agencies (Europol, eu-LISA, Frontex, EMCDDA, Eurojust, CEPOL, FRA, EUAA) as well as the European Commission (DG Home and Joint Research Centre), General Secretariat of the Council and the Office of the EU Counter Terrorism Coordinator. In 2022 upon COSI request, the Hub completed a 'mapping' of EU internal security research and innovation actors and topics[39]. The findings were presented to the Hub Steering Group in September 2022. Next, the Hub produced a multi-annual planning of activities 2023-2026[40] that was endorsed by the Hub Steering Group and the COSI in Q1 2023, and now provides the basis for the Hub's activities. Prominent among the currently ongoing activities are a report on encryption, involving Europol EC3, Eurojust, JRC, DG HOME, eu-LISA as well as the Europol Innovation Lab; and a review of the various online platforms available to the security research and innovation community, which will present options for reinforced collaboration opportunities in the future. An additional project is also underway, in which the JRC is working to develop a darknet monitoring platform for the use of Europol and the EMCDDA.

AP4AI[41] is a project under the umbrella of the Hub and has been an important priority for the Europol Innovation Lab in 2022 and 2023. The project developed **Accountability Principles for Artificial Intelligence**, and validated them with a range of practitioners from various disciplines. In 2023, attention turned to developing an **online tool** to enable practitioners to navigate the implementation of accountable AI and to conduct self-assessments. The content of the guidelines was also continuously updated to reflect the expected requirements of the EU AI Act as well as user feedback.

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[31] The Cybercrime Law Enforcement Practitioners' Network

[32] The European Anti-Cybercrime Technology Development Association

[33] The European Cybercrime Training and Education Group

[34] The European Network of Forensic Science Institutes

[35] The European Network of Law Enforcement Technology Services

[36] "Empowering a Pan-European Network to Counter Hybrid Threats"

[37] "Innovation By Developing A European Procurer Networking For Security Research Services"

[38] So far only eu-LISA has committed a full-time staff member to work with Europol Innovation Lab staff in the Hub 'secretariat'. Other Hub Team members provide varying degrees of support to selected Hub activities and represent their agencies at Hub team meetings.

[39] 14695/22.

[40] 5603/23

[41] www.ap4ai.eu

Europol Excellence Awards in Innovation

The Lab is also coordinating the third edition of the **Europol Excellence Awards in Innovation**, celebrating the most innovative initiatives taking place at national level in Operations, development of Technical Solutions, or in Ethics, Diversity and Inclusion.

4.2. Policy & Networks Function - Strategic Priorities 2024-2025

Proactive engagement and close collaboration with the private sector, academia and research institutes are essential to achieve Europol's strategic priority to be at the forefront of law enforcement innovation.

Industry and Research Days

The new Europol Strategy therefore foresees the organisation of regular **Industry and Research Days**. The first such event is scheduled to take place in January 2024. The main purpose of such events is to bring together Europol staff, MS representatives and other stakeholders around topics that have been previously defined within the Europol operational Units and to identify solutions on how to tackle gaps and needs in Law Enforcement capabilities. The events will also be aimed at boosting mutual understanding between law enforcement end-users, private companies and research and technology organisations (RTOs). Industry and Research Days are the most suitable format in which to achieve this purpose. The Industry and Research Days framework is designed to provide the right conditions, including legality, transparency and avoidance of conflict of interest. The experience of the European Commission, Frontex, eu-LISA and EU-funded projects have informed the proposed Europol approach. The Industry and Research Days are also an important element in fulfilling Europol's new research and innovation mandate (Article 4a revised Europol Regulation).

Collaboration with Academia

A key aspect in this regard is to continue **strengthening cooperation with academia**. The new Europol Strategy highlights the importance of leveraging the specialised expertise developed by academic partners. In autumn 2022, the Innovation Lab communicated to MB WG IM the intention to identify possibilities for cooperating with academia on R&I projects, capitalising on the highly specialised skills of European researchers. Researchers can share with Europol findings on topics of interest, ranging from applied science (e.g. computer vision) to the humanities (e.g. accountability and Artificial Intelligence), thus complementing the intelligence picture of Europol's staff and of the Lab's stakeholders. Researchers and academics can also contribute to develop ready-to-use technical solutions that can be shared on the ETR or integrated in the toolbox of national LEAs. Finally, academics can help formulate sound research and validation methodologies, ensuring that the work of the Europol Innovation Lab is well-grounded and its reputation for delivering high quality research is strengthened.

The Lab will make use of the new possibilities offered by the **amended Europol internship programme to recruit young scientists** over a longer period of time to work on core group projects. It will also continue to collaborate informally with European universities on topics of common interest.

However, in 2024 and 2025, the Lab would like to explore with HR the possibilities to establish **administrative framework for the temporary embedment of academic experts within innovation projects** to swiftly enable their participation. Lastly, the Lab will continue to explore new resourcing models. These are, for example, the temporary insourcing of skillsets, or the clarification of intellectual property rights (IPR) when co-creating new solutions

EU Innovation Hub for Internal Security

The Hub Team will carry out its activities as delineated in its multi-annual plan 2023-2026[42].

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As requested by the Hub Steering Group, it is expected that the mapping of existing communication platforms, including the presentation of options for the Hub, will lead to the Steering Group choosing the most appropriate way forward and the implementation of such platform/tool in 2024 and beyond.

The further conceptualisation of the European Data Space for Innovation[43] (EU SDSI) is awaited in 2024. In line with the EY study[44] commissioned by DG HOME, several options for its implementation include a critical governance role for the Hub, thereby accommodating the cross-sectorial nature of both the SDSI and the Hub.

In line with its inception, the High-level expert group on access to data for effective law enforcement, established by the Presidency[45], is currently progressing its work in three working groups. The Joint Encryption report, to be published by the Hub at the beginning of 2024, is meant to feed into this discussion. Depending on the results of the endeavour, the Hub could be entrusted with implementing parts of a possible outcome.

Whereas AP4AI started off as a Hub pilot project, the most recent developments rather seem to shift its centre of interest to the law enforcement sector, dedicated to implement the future EU AI Act. The Lab, in cooperation with its academic partner, is currently improving the functionalities of the online tool incrementally. Further steps such as the intended hosting of the AP4AI platform at Europol will depend on their prioritisation in the ICT work plan. Both the improved functionality as well as the hosting at Europol are important features for law enforcement practitioners to increase trust in the security of their information and to ensure the user friendliness of the tool. For further validation of the tool, the Lab will continue reaching out to the law enforcement community via the EuCB's Strategic Group on AI. The tool, which has been designed together with the JHA community under the umbrella of the Hub, can be offered to all JHA Agencies for implementation at their discretion in their respective sector.

Further integrating the Innovation Lab with other IMU functions

A key strategic priority going forward is **to support the further integration of the Innovation Lab with other IMU functions.** This objective relates to Objective 4 in the Information Management Strategy: *Ensure alignment between Innovation and Information Management, especially to seize opportunities in AI, data science and other emerging technologies.* A special focus in this regard will be to support the coordination on biometrics in close cooperation with the designated C3-11 contact point and O1-3.

5. Resource developments and outlook

In this section, an overview of the resources allocated to the Innovation Lab is provided.

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[42] 5603/23

[43] Please see above, reference is made to the potential of the EU SDSI for the EU law enforcement community, and Europol's crucial part of providing the core element in the form of a sandbox to the architecture of the SDSI.

[44] Final study to be referenced. Current version p. 12 "The central body could be set-up within the competence of Europol or the EU Innovation Hub for Internal Security (in relation to which Europol would then have a specific role concerning police)."

[45] 8281/23

5.1. Workforce

The team currently counts sixteen (16) members, among which ten (10) Temporary Agents (including the head of team), two (2) Contract Agents, and three (3) cost-free SNEs. In the second half of 2023, a part-time contractor is also procured to support with the activities of the Lab.

The detailed breakdown or positions per Office is presented in the table below. Each team member has been strategically allocated to contribute their unique expertise and skill set to the tasks and responsibilities of the corresponding Office.

Position Type	HoT (TA)		
	Office 1	Office 2	Office 3
TA	3	3	3
CA	2	0	0
SNE	1	1	1
Contractor	0	0	1
Total	6	4	5

Furthermore, since the Lab is coordinating the H2020 projects, currently five (5) H2020 funded CAs with technical profile were recruited by the Lab and placed within C1 to work on the H2020 projects, four (4) of which will remain in 2024, (exclusively funded by and working on STARLIGHT). One extra H2020 funded CA is expected in Q3 2023, to support with the project coordination and will be placed in the Lab. All these H2020-funded CAs will leave Europol when the STARLIGHT project finishes (2025). The amended Europol Regulation no longer allows Europol to benefit directly and financially from H2020 and Horizon Europe research projects, so Europol will lose access to these highly qualified grant-funded CAs.

This raises concerns about the potential loss of critical technical expertise and capacity (dedicated technical resources) to work exclusively on innovation projects. More options need to be explored to potentially identify opportunities for new staff hires or new partnerships to mitigate any potential gaps in the technical capabilities.

Furthermore, in the second half of 2023, one additional cost-free SNE from the Swedish Police will join the Innovation Lab, bringing the overall number of SNEs up to a total of four (4) (2 French, 1 Dutch and 1 Swedish). Cost-free SNEs bring significant value to the work of the Lab in supporting all three Offices, as well as providing a crucial link back to national competent authorities. The Lab further aims to encourage Member States to second staff as it allows them to be more actively and closely linked into its work. Finally, two new interns are expected to join towards the end of 2023.

5.2. IMU budget overview

Presented below is an overview of the high-level unit budget of the Information Management Unit (C3) for 2023, underscoring the financial distributions that have underpinned the strategic initiatives and operational undertakings of the Lab (as well as the other IMU teams, and include operational expenses such as the travel budget) in the past couple of years.

- The current 2023 budget is €650,550.

Furthermore, the Lab has been allocated a Stream in the ICT workplan, in order to ensure access to dedicated technical ICT resources for the Lab initiatives. Hence, the Lab acts as the business representative of **NEO Stream 5**, which includes both ICT manpower and budget. **The availability of the resources and budget has so far not materialised according to plan**, as it depends on the prioritisation of the work of other streams and the availability of the allocated resources. ████████████████████████████

6. Conclusion

The Management Board is invited to take note of, and provide feedback on, the information provided.

7. References

- Europol Innovation Lab Annual Activity Report 2021, The Hague, 28 February 2022, EDOC#1207378v6
- EuCB Annual Report, Management Board meeting 21-22 March 2023, item 11e.iii; EDOC#1276572v2B
- Europol Strategy: *Delivering Security in Partnership*, June 2023

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[47] EDOC #1141074v2B
[48] EDOC #1235968
[49] EDOC #1252229