

## **Written contribution to JPSG The Europol Innovation Lab - May 2020**

### **Introduction**

On 8 October 2019, Ministers at the JHA Council expressed their support for the creation of an innovation lab at Europol. Consequently, Europol has established a Europol innovation project team to devise a structure, which will carry out the tasks given by the JHA Council.

The objectives given by the JHA Ministers to the Europol Innovation Lab is to *act as monitor of new technological developments and drive innovation, including by developing common technological solutions for Member States in the field of internal security. It needs to ensure cooperation of all relevant actors, including other relevant research bodies and EU agencies, and to avoid duplication of existing structures.*<sup>1</sup>

### **A strategic actor in the field of innovation**

The JHA Council decision confirms the role of Europol as a strategic actor in the field of innovation, an ambition also clearly spelled out in Europol's Strategy 2020+<sup>2</sup>. Europol understands innovation as a way of adapting new ideas and methods to improve the work of investigators around Europe. Europol identified four core pillars that will guide the Innovation Lab in addressing the challenges posed to investigators and police by emerging technologies: data, technology, workforce and ethics.

The Europol Innovation Lab will support investigators and law enforcement agencies in making the most of emerging technologies to do their job better. For instance finding better ways to analyse large amounts of data to help investigations, or learning how 3D-printing technologies can be misused by criminals. The Lab will also contribute to avoid duplication, create synergies and pool resources for example by finding out whether police or customs in other countries are experimenting and developing new innovative tools that could be relevant for the work of other European colleagues.

The Europol Innovation Lab wants to help investigators in developing greater insights and to have a higher impact, in a world shifting from bricks and mortar to bits and bytes. Technology has a big impact on the development of crime, with criminals quickly adopting and integrating new technologies to plan and perform their criminal acts and change modus operandi. At the same time, new technologies also present new opportunities for law enforcement in tackling new criminal threats and the Europol Innovation Lab will help to make the most of these opportunities.

### **Developing the structure of the Europol Innovation Lab**

The Lab is still in its inception phase and depending on the availability of resources, it will be composed of four functions serving both strategic and operational needs and seeking to achieve the four objectives assigned to Europol by the JHA Council.

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<sup>1</sup> JHA Council Decision, 7-8 October 2019, 12837/19.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/europol-strategy-2020>

These four elements are: 1) the Projects, 2) the Observatory, 3) the Network of Innovators and 4) the EU Innovation Hub for Internal Security (a distinct entity from the Lab but hosted at the Lab).

- 1) **Projects** on innovative technologies will be initiated with EU Member States to develop tools and provide solutions to serve the operational needs of the EU law enforcement community. The projects will be steered in an inclusive manner: EU Member States will propose and lead specific innovation projects in the framework of core groups, composed of volunteered EU Member States and agencies. They will be supported by all the components of the Innovation Lab. Tools and solutions resulting from such development work will be shared among stakeholders with a view to improve operational results. Relevant projects will be business-driven and involve national and European Data Protection supervisors with a view to elaborate data protection law-compliant solutions.

Currently the Europol Innovation Lab is supporting EU Member States to implement three recently awarded H2020 funding projects, aimed at developing tools to enhance the ability of law enforcement agencies to process large amount of data. For example, one of the projects will deliver a semi-automated content analysis and prioritisation mechanism to speed up the processing of inflow of online Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) referrals received by law enforcement agencies around Europe. This is a critical project given the continuously increasing volume of CSAM posted online and referred to law enforcement agencies. Another project supported by the Europol Innovation Lab and conducted by a group of EU Member States in partnership with the EU Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission is the development of a software based on common European standards to help European forensic investigators to extract digital evidence from a range of personal vehicles.

At a later stage, Europol's ambitions is to be in a position to fund and steer research and development activities of core groups of EU Member States. However, this requires that the Europol Regulation is adapted to the requirements of new technologies: Europol could in the future, commission research projects directly, administer funding, and ensure cross-European alignment of plans and projects in the field of innovation and emerging technologies in the field of Law Enforcement.

- 2) The Lab will also include a strong technology foresight component: **the Observatory**. In close cooperation with the Joint Research Centre, it will provide assessments on the risks, threats and opportunities of emerging technologies for the law enforcement community. These assessments and reports will be developed in close partnership with EU Member States and other relevant actors such as the Interpol Innovation Centre.
- 3) The **Network of Innovators** will be maintained and used by the Europol Innovation Lab to outreach to industry, civil society, international organisations and academia in support of individual projects and to enrich the Observatory function. It will also rely on existing LEA networks such as ENLETS and I-LEADS.
- 4) **The EU Innovation Hub for Internal Security** – will be a distinct entity from the Europol Innovation Lab (which will mostly serve the interest of the law enforcement community). The Hub will act as a joint EU platform aimed at ensuring coordination and collaboration between all EU and national actors in the wider field of internal security (including border management, criminal justice and the security aspects of migration and customs). The set-up and the governance model of the Hub was agreed by COSI on 21<sup>th</sup> February 2020 (5757/20) between

EU Member States, the EU Presidency, the General Secretariat of the Council, the European Commission, and EU Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Agencies.

The EU Innovation Hub for Internal Security will be a collaborative network of innovation labs, hosted by Europol, but composed of representatives of EU Member States and other EU JHA agencies to ensure the cross-sectorial nature of the Hub. Its future functions were detailed in document 7929/20 adopted by COSI on 15 May. They include: mapping of ongoing projects (EU and national) based on contributions from other labs and the European Commission's work, and assessing gaps and needs based on contributions from other labs while COSI will provide guidance on the prioritisation of support that the hub should provide. Taking into account the sectorial contributions of EU agencies' labs, the Hub will identify domains that are of cross-sectorial nature and will design a methodology to assess the results of the projects and support the dissemination of their results. The Hub will map the relevant EU research and innovation funding sources and opportunities as well as relevant national funding sources. Lastly, It will support the delivery of innovative and cutting-edge products for the security of citizens in the EU, with a view to better assess the risks and foster the use and development of advanced and emerging technologies. However, given the uncertainty about its future resources, it is not clear when the Hub will be launched.

### **Conclusion:**

The mission set by the JHA Ministers to Europol in the field of innovation is ambitious but it is key to keeping the European law enforcement's ability to investigate and prevent criminal activities in the European Union by making the most of the opportunities offered by emerging technologies. Europol has been busy developing plans and structures to respond to the challenge over the last six months. However, these efforts can only bear fruit if additional resources are made available to the agency.