Beyond Borders, Beyond Treaties: The EU–Mexico Struggle Against Transnational Drug Trafficking

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Fernanda Marin



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Introduction

Over the past decades, globalization has brought numerous benefits, including economic growth, technological innovation, market expansion, and greater interconnectedness among societies. Nevertheless, it has also generated significant challenges, such as rising economic inequality, dependence on external markets, the erosion of cultural identities, and the transnationalization of organized crime.

In recent years, Europol has reported the increasing presence of Mexican cartels in Europe. These organizations have been linked to the trafficking of traditional illicit substances, such as heroin and cocaine, whose distrib-

ution became particularly prominent during the 1980s and 1990s under the control of Latin American criminal organizations. Although amphetamines, methamphetamine, and fentanyl have existed for several decades, their production, distribution, and consumption have received increasing attention since the 2010s because of the serious public-health risks associated with synthetic drugs. At the same time, various reports have highlighted the strengthening of criminal cooperation networks between European and Latin American actors involved in the production, trafficking, and distribution of illicit drugs across the European continent.

The effectiveness of international cooperation in this area has a direct impact on public security, social stability, asset recovery, and the protection of human rights in both Europe and Mexico. The transnational expansion of drug-trafficking networks has contributed to the strengthening and diversification of criminal organizations, increasing their operational capacity and presence across multiple territories. As a result, organized criminal activity has been associated with violence, homicide, corruption, and other human-rights violations. Furthermore, the consolidation of these criminal networks has intensified violence within Mexican territory, particularly affecting vulnerable communities and posing a persistent challenge to institutions responsible for maintaining security and upholding the rule of law.

This article examines legal and judicial cooperation between the European Union and Mexico from 2000 to 2026. It asks to what extent these frameworks have strengthened transnational approaches to combating drug trafficking and organized crime, and what governance challenges continue to limit their effectiveness. The analysis focuses on key mechanisms, including mutual legal assistance, extradition, intelligence-sharing through Europol and Interpol, financial investigations, and asset recovery. It draws on reports from Europol, Eurojust, the European Union Drugs Agency, UNODC, the Financial Action Task Force, and relevant national authorities, as well as selected case studies. The article assesses the impact of these mechanisms on public security, asset recovery, and human-rights safeguards before concluding with policy recommendations aimed at improving coordination and accountability.

Drug Trafficking in Europe

Drug trafficking is not merely a Latin American problem. According to the European Union Drugs Agency, almost 2.7 million people aged 15 to 34 in the European Union, representing 2.7% of this age group, reported using cocaine during the previous year (EUDA, 2025). Amphetamine and methamphetamine are also present in European drug markets, alongside heroin and opioids. The consumption of illicit substances varies considerably across countries: Spain and the Czech Republic report some of the highest levels of cannabis use, while France, the Netherlands, and Ireland report high levels of cocaine use. These differences demonstrate that

Europe does not have a uniform drug market and that criminal networks must adapt their activities to different national contexts.

In June 2024, French authorities seized 216 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine and arrested two French nationals in connection with the case. The subsequent investigation identified a criminal network involved in the production and trafficking of synthetic drugs, with links to the Sinaloa Cartel and criminal groups operating in Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. In May 2025, French authorities, supported by Europol, arrested 16 people in France and Belgium and carried out several searches. Europol facilitated the exchange of information, provided analytical support, and contributed to the coordination of the investigation (Europol, 2025).

According to the investigation, the two main organizers of the European network relied heavily on the logistical support, expertise, and preparation provided by Mexican cartels. In turn, the Mexican cartels depended on local intermediaries to establish their operations and expand their influence (Millán Valencia, 2025). This case illustrates that transnational criminal cooperation does not involve only the movement of drugs across borders. It may also involve the transfer of technical knowledge, logistical support, chemical precursors, production methods, and local distribution networks.

The EU–Mexico Legal and Institutional Framework

The Economic Partnership, Political Coordination and Cooperation Agreement, commonly known as the EU–Mexico Global Agreement, has provided the main legal framework governing bilateral relations between the European Union and Mexico since 2000. In 2026, the parties signed the Modernised Global Agreement (MGA), which updates and expands the previous framework. However, its full legal effect depends on the completion of the applicable ratification procedures.

Although the agreement primarily supports political, economic, and commercial relations, it also provides a broader framework for cooperation in areas such as justice, security, human rights, and the fight against transnational organized crime. In this context, the MGA contributes to cooperation based on public international law, including the exchange of information, law-enforcement coordination, mutual legal assistance, and measures aimed at combating illicit drug trafficking and financial crime.

The agreement also supports closer cooperation between Mexican law-enforcement authorities and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, Europol. However, extradition procedures remain largely governed by bilateral agreements between Mexico and individual EU Member States, as well as by national legislation. Therefore, rather than replacing these agreements, the MGA complements them by strengthening the broader framework for judicial cooperation, including evidence-gath-

ering, asset freezing, asset recovery, and the prosecution of individuals suspected of involvement in transnational organized crime.

Mutual Legal Assistance and Extradition

Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA) in criminal matters is the process through which states request and provide assistance to one another in serving judicial documents and gathering evidence for use in criminal proceedings (UNODC, n.d.). However, the willingness and ability of states to provide such assistance varies considerably. According to the Council of Europe (2013), cooperation may depend on the domestic laws of the requested state, the nature of its relationship with the requesting state, and the responsiveness of the officials responsible for processing the request. Therefore, establishing and maintaining strong working relationships between authorities across jurisdictions is essential.

For this reason, legal instruments such as the MGA are important for addressing transnational crime. They can provide a broader framework for cooperation and facilitate legal procedures related to drug trafficking. Nevertheless, the MGA should be understood as complementing, rather than replacing, the bilateral treaties and domestic laws that govern specific forms of judicial cooperation. For example, a Mexican investigation may require bank records held in a European country, while a European investigation may require evidence or witness testimony located in Mexico.

Extradition is another important mechanism of judicial cooperation in the fight against transnational organized crime. It refers to the legal process through which one state transfers an individual to another state for prosecution or to serve a sentence following a criminal conviction. In the context of EU–Mexico relations, extradition is not governed by a single EU-wide treaty. Instead, requests are generally handled through bilateral agreements between Mexico and individual EU Member States, together with the domestic legislation of the requested country.

This structure can create practical and legal difficulties. Different rules regarding evidence, procedural guarantees, the principle of dual criminality, and the rights of defendants may delay or complicate extradition proceedings. The principle of dual criminality requires the conduct for which extradition is requested to constitute a criminal offence in both the requesting and requested states. In addition, courts may examine whether the individual would receive a fair trial and whether there is a risk of torture, inhuman treatment, or other violations of fundamental rights.

Consequently, extradition cannot be understood as an automatic process. Although it can prevent individuals suspected of organized crime from avoiding prosecution by moving across borders, it must also comply with national legislation, international human-rights standards, and due-process guarantees. This creates a permanent tension between the need

to respond rapidly to transnational criminal activity and the obligation to protect the rights of the individuals concerned.

Intelligence-Sharing and Law-Enforcement Cooperation

Information-sharing represents another central component of EU–Mexico cooperation. Criminal organizations frequently operate through several jurisdictions, using international routes, companies, financial intermediaries, encrypted communications, and local criminal partners. For this reason, law-enforcement authorities require timely information about suspects, drug shipments, criminal structures, financial transactions, and links between organizations.

Europol can support this process by facilitating the analysis and exchange of criminal intelligence between European authorities and international partners. Interpol also contributes to international police cooperation through notices and the exchange of information concerning wanted individuals and criminal activities. Eurojust, meanwhile, focuses primarily on judicial cooperation by helping prosecutors and judicial authorities coordinate investigations and proceedings involving multiple countries.

One of the main benefits of EU–Mexico cooperation has been the development of stronger channels for exchanging criminal intelligence. This cooperation helps authorities move beyond isolated arrests and investigate the broader organizations behind drug shipments. It also allows authorities to identify the roles of local intermediaries, transport coordinators, financial operators, and suppliers of chemical precursors.

However, intelligence-sharing does not automatically produce successful prosecutions. Information must be legally obtained, properly verified, and transformed into admissible evidence. Therefore, the value of intelligence depends not only on the speed of communication but also on the ability of prosecutors and courts to use that information in criminal proceedings.

Cooperation can also improve coordination between police, prosecutors, customs authorities, and judicial institutions. Criminal networks often divide their activities between different countries: drugs may be produced in one location, transported through another, stored in a third, and sold in several European markets. Joint investigations allow authorities to examine these activities as part of the same criminal structure.

This form of cooperation can include simultaneous searches, coordinated arrests, shared investigative teams, and the exchange of documents and witness statements. It also allows authorities to prevent criminal groups from exploiting differences between national jurisdictions. Nevertheless, coordination remains uneven. The European Union does not operate as a single criminal-justice system, and national authorities retain different procedures, investigative powers, and priorities. Consequently, cooperation may be effective in one Member State but slower or more limited in another.

Financial Investigations and Asset Recovery

Financial investigations constitute another essential dimension of the transnational response to drug trafficking. Criminal organizations depend on financial resources to purchase drugs, maintain logistical networks, corrupt officials, acquire weapons, and expand their operations. As a result, cooperation cannot focus exclusively on arrests and drug seizures; it must also target the economic structures that allow criminal organizations to survive.

Financial cooperation may help authorities identify suspicious transactions, shell companies, bank accounts, properties, and investments connected to criminal activity. It may also facilitate the freezing and confiscation of assets obtained through drug trafficking. These measures can reduce the operational capacity of criminal groups and make it more difficult for them to reinvest their profits.

However, asset recovery is often slow and legally complex. Criminal funds can be transferred through several countries, hidden behind legitimate businesses, or converted into real estate and other assets. Authorities must also satisfy national evidentiary requirements before property can be frozen or confiscated. Consequently, the existence of cooperation mechanisms does not guarantee that criminal profits will actually be recovered.

The control of chemical precursors is also becoming increasingly important because synthetic drugs can be produced using substances that have legitimate commercial uses. Amphetamine, methamphetamine, and fentanyl production may depend on access to chemical compounds, laboratory equipment, and international supply chains. Cooperation between customs authorities, law-enforcement agencies, and regulatory bodies can therefore help identify suspicious transactions, monitor exports, and prevent the diversion of legal chemicals for illegal production.

Assessing the Effectiveness of Cooperation

These mechanisms demonstrate that EU–Mexico cooperation extends beyond political dialogue and includes practical tools for criminal investigations. Mutual legal assistance, extradition, intelligence-sharing, financial investigations, and precursor control can strengthen a transnational approach by allowing authorities to collect evidence, identify criminal networks, prosecute suspects, and disrupt illicit financial structures across borders.

The available mechanisms have strengthened the transnational approach to combating drug trafficking in several ways. They have improved communication between authorities, supported intelligence-sharing, facilitated joint investigations, and increased attention to criminal finances. They have also helped authorities understand that drug trafficking involves broader networks rather than isolated offenders.

Nevertheless, these achievements remain partial. Cooperation is often dependent on the willingness and capacity of individual institutions and Member States. It can be successful in specific operations while remaining limited at the structural level. The main question is therefore not whether cooperation exists, but whether it is sufficiently consistent, rapid, and accountable to respond to the changing nature of organized crime.

Governance Challenges

The first major challenge is the fragmentation of legal systems. Mexico and the EU Member States apply different rules concerning evidence, criminal procedure, data protection, extradition, and asset confiscation. These differences can delay investigations and make it difficult to use evidence collected in one jurisdiction in the courts of another.

Furthermore, the EU is not a single state with one unified criminal-law system. Although EU institutions can facilitate cooperation, national authorities remain responsible for many investigations and prosecutions. This creates different levels of cooperation depending on the country involved.

Requests for mutual legal assistance can take a considerable amount of time. They often require translations, formal documents, judicial authorization, and review by several institutions. When a request is incomplete or does not meet the legal requirements of the receiving state, it may be returned or delayed.

These delays are particularly problematic in drug-trafficking investigations, where criminal networks can quickly move people, drugs, money, and evidence between jurisdictions. A legal mechanism may exist formally but still be ineffective if it cannot operate within the necessary timeframe.

The effectiveness of cooperation also depends on institutional capacity and integrity. Limited resources, insufficient training, weak investigative capacity, and bureaucratic obstacles can reduce the impact of international agreements. Corruption creates an additional challenge because officials may disclose confidential information, interfere with investigations, or fail to act against powerful criminal actors.

Information-sharing must also comply with privacy rules and human-rights standards. European institutions generally require strong safeguards concerning the collection, storage, transfer, and use of personal data. Mexican authorities must therefore demonstrate that shared information will be used lawfully and protected against misuse.

This creates a difficult balance. Authorities need rapid access to information, but individuals must also be protected from unlawful surveillance, arbitrary detention, and the misuse of personal data. A system that prioritizes security without accountability may weaken public trust and create legal challenges.

The EU and Mexico do not always prioritize the same issues. European authorities may emphasize border control, organized crime, money laundering, and the protection of European markets. Mexican authorities may focus more heavily on domestic violence, territorial control, firearms, and the security consequences of criminal organizations within Mexico.

These different priorities can make it difficult to establish common objectives. Political changes in either Mexico or the EU may also affect the continuity of cooperation and the resources assigned to joint initiatives.

International cooperation raises questions about who is responsible when information is misused, evidence is mishandled, or human rights are violated. Because several institutions and countries may participate in one investigation, responsibility can become difficult to identify.

There are also concerns about sovereignty. Cooperation must respect the jurisdiction of each country and should not allow foreign institutions to operate without appropriate legal authorization. The challenge is to create effective cooperation without undermining democratic oversight or national legal procedures.

Policy Recommendations

The EU and Mexico should develop clearer procedures for urgent requests involving serious organized crime, especially requests related to bank records, digital evidence, asset freezing, and witness protection.

The parties should strengthen communication between Europol, Eurojust, Mexican prosecutors, financial-intelligence authorities, customs agencies, and national police forces. They should also provide regular training in international criminal law, financial investigations, digital evidence, asset recovery, data protection, and transnational case management.

Information-sharing agreements should include clear rules on lawful collection, purpose limitation, data security, independent oversight, and remedies for misuse. The effectiveness of cooperation should also be evaluated through measurable indicators, including the number of mutual legal-assistance requests, average processing times, joint investigations, assets frozen or recovered, and prosecutions resulting from shared information.

Finally, the response should not focus exclusively on arrests and interdiction. It should also address prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and the social conditions that contribute to drug use and recruitment by criminal organizations.

Conclusion

EU–Mexico legal and judicial cooperation has strengthened transnational approaches to drug trafficking and organized crime, but its effectiveness remains partial. Existing frameworks have created channels for mutual legal assistance, extradition, intelligence-sharing, joint investigations, financial investigations, and asset recovery. These mechanisms allow authorities to

investigate criminal networks operating across borders and to target not only individual offenders but also the logistical and financial structures supporting organized crime.

However, cooperation continues to be limited by legal fragmentation, institutional differences, procedural delays, corruption risks, insufficient resources, data-protection requirements, and concerns regarding human rights and accountability. The EU–Mexico relationship therefore illustrates an important governance paradox: criminal organizations increasingly operate through flexible transnational networks, while the institutions responding to them remain divided among national jurisdictions.

The central finding of this article is that legal and judicial cooperation has improved the capacity of European and Mexican authorities to respond to transnational crime, but it has not yet produced a fully integrated or consistently effective system. Future progress will depend not only on adopting new agreements but also on implementing them through faster procedures, stronger institutional coordination, transparent oversight, and effective human-rights safeguards. Cooperation should therefore be assessed not only by the number of arrests or seizures, but also by its ability to produce lawful, sustainable, and accountable criminal-justice outcomes.

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